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Student, Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Emergent Literacy

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Student, Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Emergent Literacy

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Dedicated to

John Robinson McLemore:

The person who taught me the value of education.

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This qualitative study was conducted to illuminate the different perceptions of students, parents, and teachers in one urban classroom pertaining to learning to read and write. The study explored the similarities, differences, and relationships among these perceptions.

One kindergarten classroom was selected in an urban school that was currently implementing literacy initiatives. Eighteen students, six parents and three teachers were interviewed to provide insight into their views of emergent literacy.

Five themes were identified as reoccurring topics and are discussed in the findings: activities that count as reading and writing, motivation for learning to read, how

children acquire literacy skills, the use of technology to promote literacy, and working with students at home. The findings suggested that there are few literacy related issues upon which students, parents and teachers agree.

Five conclusions were drawn based upon the findings. The conclusions examined the use of metacognitive discussions, appropriateness of motivational techniques, teachers' knowledge of research, effectiveness of computers in the classroom, and benefits to parents of volunteering in the classroom. The need to improve communication and interaction between students, parents, teachers and administrators was illuminated in this study.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

How do children make sense of their learning experiences? Do their understandings match those of their teachers? Do their parents' opinions have an impact upon the effectiveness of teacher instruction? Answers to these types of questions are ambiguous at best, due in part to a lack of research involving students' and parents' understandings of the learning process.

Consider that a school board wants to determine the effectiveness of a new literacy program that has recently been implemented in their county. How will they go about determining if the program is advantageous? The first place they will look to is test scores. Did the students benefitting from this program show gains on standardized tests? Teachers may be given the opportunity to express their opinions in the form of a survey. It is unlikely, however, that they will be spoken to in person. Even less likely is that parents or students will ever be consulted. Their opinions concerning instructional programs seldom appear in educational research, thus giving the impression

that parents are unimportant factors in attaining educational success.

Researchers are beginning to realize that students and their families can provide valuable information on improving our educational system. At a time when schools are continually appearing in the news in an unfavorable light, educators are eagerly looking for new insights into ways students can increase achievement.

A major concern of educators today is that large numbers of students are failing to learn to read. Despite teachers' continuous efforts, numerous children are not mastering basic literacy skills. Teachers are reading professional books, attending training, and still remain unable to successfully teach all of their students.

The importance of this problem results from the fact that reading success is the key to educational success (Adams, 1990; Honig, 1996; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). So the same students who are at risk for reading failure are also at risk for school failure. Honig (1996) stressed the importance of this relationship: "Access to further education, high-skilled jobs, and a chance to participate in the higher reaches of society depends in large part on school success, which itself is highly correlated with the ability to read" (p. 1).

How can we help all children to learn to read successfully? Adams (1996) argued that how well a child learns to read in first grade is largely dependent upon what they already know about reading prior to starting school. This leads us to question when it is that children start becoming literate.

Most researchers agree that literacy development begins in children's homes, long before they ever enter a classroom (Adams, 1996; Fisher, 1991; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Stahl, 1997; Teal & Sulzby, 1986). In homes where children are provided with rich literacy experiences, they are read to, talked with and provided a variety of reading and writing materials (Adams, 1990). These types of literacy experiences have a positive impact upon students' future learning.

Research discusses the positive correlation between children's experiences with print prior to entering school and their success at learning to read (Adams, 1990 & 1991; Cronan, Cruz, & Arriaga , 1996; Fisher, 1991; Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 1998; Juel, 1994; Stahl, 1997). Researchers have identified the strong predictors of reading success in school as being tied to the child's previous experiences with print and knowledge of print concepts.

Children with early literacy experiences have typically mastered many skills prior to entering school. They can identify letters and shapes (Adams, 1996), understand basic concepts of print (Fisher, 1991), and engage in word play such as nursery rhyme recitation (Holdaway, 1979; Hopkins 1998). These children have had numerous opportunities to explore letters and words, and to gain an understanding of the many ways that language is used.

During the 2000 to 3000 hours of pre-literacy activities that many students experience prior to school, the concept of phonemic awareness is also developed (Adams, 1990). This understanding that sounds of syllables can be broken down into smaller sounds and graphemes is crucial to students' becoming proficient readers. Most researchers agree that phonemic awareness is critical for reading success (Adams, 1990; Hiebert et al., 1998; Juel, 1988; Richgels, Poremba & McGee, 1996; Yopp, 1992). The question then becomes one concerning what we can do about the students who lack this awareness and knowledge.

Children who enter school without these pre-literacy experiences begin their education at a distinct disadvantage. Not only are they unable to identify letters and sounds, they often have had little opportunity to manipulate sounds and words. They have not learned nursery

rhymes and have had limited experiences with writing materials. Many have had no exposure to books (Reissner, 1996).

The issue does not concern the intellectual capabilities of these children. Often when teachers encounter students that have had few pre-literacy experiences, they assume that the children are academically slow. This is not true in most cases. Many of these children are as bright as their peers, but have simply had no prior exposure to situations that promote literacy. Adams (1990) stressed that unless we attempt to compensate for these missed experiences, such children will likely never develop as successful readers or writers.

Because the development of concepts of print and phonemic awareness should begin in the home, it is important for educators to understand the connection between home experiences and school success. Parents need to be seen as partners in creating a successful school experience for all children (Walberg, 1984).

Many parental interactions with children have been found to promote reading success. These include modeling reading, talking with children, providing access to books, and teaching letter recognition activities (Adams, 1990; Cronan et al., 1996; Stahl, 1997). According to Heath

(1980), many of these interactions occur with low frequency in low income homes.

A large portion of students who are unable to meet with reading success come from low socio-economic areas (Cronan et al., 1996; Fotheringham & Creal, 1980). Since African-Americans are among the most likely to have lower incomes, they are also the most likely to have lower literacy rates (Cronan et al., 1996). Literacy has thus become a vital topic for the educators of urban, African-American children. These students make up a large percentage of the suspensions, retentions, drop-outs and special education students in our school systems (Kuykendall, 1992).

As if these factors did not combine to make reading instruction in the primary grades enough of a challenge, many researchers have found that unless students are reading successfully by the end of first grade, they are unlikely to ever catch up with their peers (Adams, 1990; Honig, 1996; Juel, 1994; Snow et al., 1998). Studies have shown that as instruction gets more difficult, students continue to fall further and further behind their peers. So the need for early intervention is evident.

Emergent literacy has recently become a critical topic in education due to the low literacy rates in our nation. For children to prosper in the academic world, they must

become proficient readers. Adams (1990) stated that reading is the key to providing students with educational success, and that educational success is the key to improving not only individuals but also our country. So learning to read becomes an important issue for individual children, as well as for society as a whole. With the emerging global economy and increasing international competition, it is imperative that we strive to educate all of our citizens, including those who are currently not meeting with academic success.

According to the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy (1990), African-American and Latino populations make up the majority of the hundreds of thousands of students that drop out of our nation's high schools yearly. In an attempt to lower these numbers, educators are reviewing research for successful instructional techniques that will promote literacy with all children. This makes clear the need for educational research and program evaluation to promote equality for all students.

The majority of teachers in our society today are white, middle class women (Aguilar & Pohan, 1996). Thus they have a limited understanding of the views of their urban, African-American students and parents. Research designed to illuminate the views of minority children and their parents can be of great assistance to these majority teachers. "It

is crucial for professionals to understand nuances of differences such as these in order to create dialogue with parents, give credence to their concerns, and find ways to accommodate their views" (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1996, p. 199). Manning (1992) supported this by suggesting a need for forming a bridge between school and home activities if we expect our urban, African-American children to begin meeting with educational success. It is therefore imperative that solid research be conducted in classrooms to provide the foundation for this bridge linking schools and homes.

Statement of the Problem

The problem for both educators and society as a whole is that large numbers of students are not learning to read. This is evidenced by both low reading competency scores and the high percentage of drop-outs annually in our country. According to Hoostein (1996) an estimated 25% of American students drop out of school prior to graduation, and many of those that remain are unsuccessful and disengaged. A greater number of African-American students drop out than do white students, 12.6% compared to 7.7% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1996). The problem with so many children dropping out of school is that they are unlikely to experience financial success later in life without a high school diploma (Hoostein, 1996). These students then become a

financial burden to our society. Because poor families are the most likely to have children that experience difficulty with learning to read in school, this vicious cycle will continue until we discover a way to break it.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the different perceptions of students, parents and teachers in one urban classroom pertaining to learning to read and write. The study explored the similarities, differences, and relationships among these perceptions. The study also examined participants' perceptions of a computer based literacy program.

Research Questions

To explore the beliefs and understandings of students, parents and teachers, this study addressed the following open-ended questions:

1. Which elements of instruction do the participants consider to be useful in promoting literacy?
2. How do the students understand the process of acquiring literacy?
3. How do the children see themselves learning in the classroom and in their homes?
4. In what ways do the parents feel that the school

is helping their children to develop as readers and writers?

5. What are parents doing at home to help their children?
6. How do teachers verbalize their role as providers of literacy instruction?

By giving a voice to all people involved in the learning process, we may discover missing links in our current research on literacy acquisition.

Methodology

In my endeavor to gain answers to the above questions, interviews were conducted to illuminate the perceptions that students, parents and teachers hold of emergent literacy. These interviews were completed over a two month period of classroom visitations.

Site Selection and Participants

To explore the perceptions of urban, African-American students and parents, it was necessary to select a school serving this population. The school was selected based upon previous experiences with staff. The author and the school faculty had worked together on county based projects and staff development initiatives. This history provided access into the school setting and a familiar professional working relationship with the staff.

To assure that numerous literacy activities would be occurring in the classroom that was selected, a school as chosen that had placed literacy as a priority. The school was utilizing the Waterford Early Reading Program, had teachers enrolled in an early literacy course, and were implementing a parent initiative. These activities combined to provide topics on which I could question the participants.

One kindergarten classroom was chosen for this study to allow for the development of a relationship between the participants and myself. The teacher selected was recommended by the principal as being effective at providing literacy instruction. We had also had previous opportunities to work together, making her comfortable with my presence in her classroom.

The selected classroom had 19 students, 18 were included in the study due to one parent's reluctance to participate. These children lived in a low income area and all but two of the participating students qualified for the federal government's free lunch program. Seventeen of the students were African-American, and one was Hispanic. Student participants included 12 males and 6 females. Over half of the students were from single parent homes.

Six parents were interviewed for this study. Three of

the parents participated in the parent initiative program and were classroom volunteers at least one day each week. Three were not classroom volunteers and had little chance to see what occurred in the classroom. All of the parent participants were female. Five were African-American and one was Hispanic. Five had no male living in the home, however one of their husbands had only recently passed away. One of the parents was a secretary, while the other five did not work outside of the home.

The selected teacher was a Caucasian female in her mid forties. She had taught primary children for 15 years. She had been employed at this school for four years, and had worked at another school in the same area with a similar population for three years prior to that. The remaining two kindergarten teachers at the school were also interviewed. They were Caucasian females in the 30 to 45 age range, and had both been at this school for at least five years.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted on six different days, spread out over a two month period. Students were interviewed at the computer station, at work tables, and as they worked in learning centers. The teachers and parents were interviewed before and after school on these same days. Each interview session was open ended, starting with a sample list of

questions. Questions were not asked in any sequence, with an attempt made to allow the participants to lead the conversations in their own directions. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Observational notes were also recorded to provide information relating to the interview sessions.

Data Analysis

Using research on emergent literacy as a tool, an interpretive screen was designed to analyze gathered information. A list of predictors of reading success was used as a starting point. Participants' views were then explored to discover if they were parallel or contradictory to the current research. In looking for relationships among the perspectives of my participants, similarities and differences of opinions were noted.

Noticeable patterns and themes were also searched for among the interview responses. After numerous readings of the interview transcriptions, a list of reoccurring topics was created. From this list a web of themes emerged. Creating a web permitted both the identification of major themes and a description of ways that these themes related to one another. This web was used as the basis for creating the narrative description of findings presented in chapter four.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This study is delimited to one kindergarten classroom in one urban school in Jacksonville, Florida. The insights gained are not generalizable in the quantitative sense, but may be useful in helping educators to understand students from similar populations.

This study had three main limitations. The first was that a study which attempts to discover the relationships among parents', students', and teachers' perceptions of emergent literacy goes beyond the reach of any one study. To restrict this broadness, the study focused solely upon one classroom. This, however, restricted conclusions drawn to relate only to that group of individuals.

A second limitation of the study involved the use of interviews. Bias and self-interest may impact information provided by participants during interviews. Another limitation concerning the use of interviews dealt specifically with young children. Some researchers believe that the language abilities of kindergarten students are not sufficiently developed to discuss adult issues (Van Galen, Noblit and Hare, 1988-89). Another concern was that in school settings students will respond to questions in ways which they think are correct rather than sharing their true feelings (Van Galen, Noblet and Hare). Hatch (1988) argued

that young children's perceptions are not inferior or undeveloped, but rather provide a perspective that differs from our own. Attempting to accurately portray the views of the young participants and discover their true perspectives provided a definite challenge.

A final limitation of this study was the existence of my own strong convictions concerning emergent literacy. As a researcher it was important to be aware of my beliefs and the ways in which these might influence not only my interpretations in the analysis stage of the study, but also decisions made throughout the study such as what was counted as data. With so many of my own thoughts and opinions relating to emergent literacy, I did not want to place the participants' interview responses into my own preconceived categories. Merriam (1988) argued that in qualitative research we are not looking for truths, but attempting to clarify the perspectives of participants. For this study to be worthwhile, the perspectives presented had to belong to the participants rather than the researcher.

Definition of Terms

The term literacy is used throughout this study because it is much broader than either reading or writing. As described by McGee and Richgels (1990), literacy is being able to find meaning in written symbols. This includes

activities involving both reading and writing.

Pre-literacy experiences are those childhood experiences that assist children in developing a sense of letters, sounds, and print. These include being read to, talked with, learning word plays and being exposed to reading and writing materials (Adams, 1996).

Emergent literacy is used to describe the process by which children learn to read and write. It covers the time from birth to early fluency in both reading and writing. Emergent literacy includes all of the pre-literacy activities mentioned above.

Phonemic awareness is an important concept in early reading instruction. Ericson and Juliebo (1988) defined it as the awareness of constituent sounds of words. This understanding that words can be broken into sounds has been identified by many researchers as crucial for reading success (Adams, 1990; Juel, 1988; Richgels, Poremba, & McGee, 1996; Yopp, 1992).

The term direct, explicit instruction is used to describe teaching that is systematically and explicitly presented to students. This is not to be confused with the instructional program Direct Instruction, which is also present in the classroom being studied.

Organization of the Study

Chapter one provided an introduction to this study. The chapter began by discussing the importance of literacy development. This chapter clearly outlined the problem, purpose, research questions, and methods for the study. The limitations of the study were then discussed, followed by definition of terms.

Chapter two reviews literature that relates to this study. The chapter begins by examining current beliefs and trends pertaining to emergent literacy. Literature regarding African-American students is then reviewed with a focus on literacy acquisition and school success. Finally, an overview of research on family involvement with schools is presented.

Chapter three describes the procedures followed to carry out this study. Beginning with site and participant selection, the discussion goes step by step through the research design. The methodology, research questions, design of the study, and methods for data collection and analysis are presented in detail.

Chapter four presents the results of this study. Written in narrative form, this is a descriptive presentation of findings discovered during the interview sessions.

Chapter five is a discussion of the findings. This chapter contains this researcher's conclusions and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To address an issue as complex as literacy acquisition among urban, African-American children, many areas of literature had to be considered and reviewed. This chapter begins by reviewing what is currently known in the area of emergent literacy focusing upon pre-literacy experiences, reading to children, and models for early intervention. This information allows the study to build upon current research and further this area of inquiry. The chapter then reviews contemporary studies on the learning patterns of urban, African American students. To accurately portray the views of any group, a necessary first step is to develop an understanding of their cultural patterns. The review of literature relating to the identified population examines these patterns. Finally, a review of literature related to family involvement in schools provides a clear picture of the ways in which parents' views relate to the process of literacy acquisition. A chapter summary concludes this section.

Emergent Literacy

A current debate among educators concerns the appropriate age at which to begin reading instruction with small children. The arguments range from the maturationalists' view that children will emerge as readers when they mature to a point of neural readiness to the interventionists' view that early assistance is the only way to assure educational equality for all children (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). In the extreme, a maturationalist view does not place great importance upon the idea of readiness activities which prepare students for school. At the other extreme of the spectrum, an interventionist view deems these readiness activities as crucial to educational success.

Numerous researchers in the field of emergent literacy position themselves along the interventionists' side of the spectrum (Adams, 1990; Fisher, 1991; Hiebert et al., 1998; Hopkins, 1998; Juel, 1994; Snow et al., 1998). They argue that unless methods are discovered to assure that all students are provided with the early learning experiences necessary to promote school success, we will never have equality in education. This argument opens the door to many questions concerning the best way to prepare students for success in school. One question that arises from this early intervention view concerns when children actually begin

developing as literate individuals. Fisher (1991) argued that literacy development begins long before children enter the school setting. Based upon this belief, researchers are now looking into what occurs in the students' homes prior to their formal school years for indicators of successful literacy acquisition.

Pre-literacy Experiences

Many children are coming to school with a wealth of pre-literacy experiences. According to Adams (1990) some students may come to school with as many as 3000 hours of these experiences, while some have as little as 200 hours. This leads educators to question what actually occurs during these hours to assist children with literacy acquisition.

A variety of learning experiences occur during the pre-literacy hours that take place in children's homes. In homes where children are provided with pre-literacy experiences, children are read to, talked with, and surrounded by an abundance of reading and writing materials (Adams, 1990). Clay (1991) stated that aside from being read to, these children played with magnetic letters, puzzles, word games and had a variety of print materials available for their use.

The importance of examining these pre-literacy experiences lies in the fact that children's success in

school correlates heavily with the amount of these experiences that they have had prior to beginning school (Snow et al., 1998). Stahl (1997) noted the importance of this phenomenon by stating that success in learning to read in school is rooted in the pre-literacy experiences to which children have been exposed prior to formal reading instruction.

Not only the amount of pre-literacy experiences, but also the types of activities in which children engage in their homes have a definite impact upon their later success with learning to read. Previous experiences with alphabet letters and shapes have been shown to assist children with literacy acquisition (Adams, 1990; Stahl, 1997). Learning to play with words through rhymes (Adams, 1990; Hopkins, 1998) has also been correlated with students' later reading abilities.

Experiences with identifying alphabet letters and shapes have a great impact upon students' later reading success. A student's ability to quickly identify letters and shapes is, according to Adams (1996), one of the best predictors of first grade reading success. Stahl (1997) concurred that knowledge of letter names is the strongest correlate to success in reading "not only at the beginning levels, but knowledge of letter names in Kindergarten is

still a significant predictor of success in reading by fourth grade" (p. 14). This pressures teachers to assure that all students are able to recognize the letters of the alphabet by the end of kindergarten.

Nursery rhymes, another major component of pre-literacy experiences, also impact students' literacy acquisition (Hopkins, 1998). Research supports the value of learning nursery rhymes by concluding that pre-school children's knowledge of these rhymes can serve as an early predictor of reading ability (Adams, 1990). Maclean, Bryant, and Bradley (1987) suggested that the foundations of phonemic awareness are built upon children's knowledge of nursery rhymes. Holdaway (1979) articulated a research based view that the power of using these popular rhymes lies in the security children feel due to the repetition and familiarity of these rhymes.

Learning and reciting nursery rhymes benefit children in several ways. "Rhymes are a natural part of a young child's life. They make up a significant part of the word games that children and parents play with each other, and indeed that children play with each other" (Bradley & Bryant, 1985, p.3). The "reading" of memorized nursery rhymes promotes the child's concept development of words and print (Martin, 1972). According to Chaparro (1984), children

"simply delight in the lyrical and rhythmical flow of the rhymes and the magic they impart through the interactions of the sounds of the language and the child's imagination" (p. 261). While learning nursery rhymes, children have many opportunities to appreciate the sounds of language and recognize rhymes and patterns in words. The practice of playing with words and their sounds assists children in developing an understanding of phonemes (Heibert et al., 1998).

This brings us to another aspect of emergent literacy which develops during these 2000 to 3000 hours of literacy experiences - phonemic awareness. Adams (1990) defined this expression as "that very basic understanding that the sounds of syllables can be broken down into a relatively small set of everywhere recurring sounds and, ultimately, that those smaller sounds correspond to graphemes" (p. 209-10). Phonemic awareness includes the ability to rhyme words, match beginning and ending consonants and to identify the number of phonemes in a given word (Stahl, 1997).

The concept of phonemic awareness is of such great importance to educators due to the fact that students can not become proficient readers without this basic knowledge. Adams (1990) argued, "Without this understanding, no amount of drill and practice can be of any use. With it,

instruction on spellings and sounds can be accomplished in ways that are far more efficient, effective, and responsive to children's needs" (p. 209). Cunningham (1995) agreed that students must possess phonemic awareness before any formal instruction in reading and writing will benefit them.

Numerous researchers support the importance of phonemic awareness for reading success (Adams, 1990; Cunningham, 1995; Hiebert et al., 1998; Juel, 1988; Richgels, Poremba, & McGee, 1996; Yopp, 1992). To add to the insights of Adams and Cunningham listed above, Richgels, Poremba, and McGee (1996) found a child's level of phonemic awareness upon entering school to be the best predictor of success in learning to read. Juel (1988) found that first graders who had not successfully mastered this ability were still in the bottom 25% of the class in reading at the end of fifth grade. Therefore, phonemic awareness appears to be highly correlated with literacy success.

The problem with the correlation between phonemic awareness and successful literacy acquisition is that numerous children arrive at school without this understanding. According to Adams (1990), "Research indicates that this insight (phonemic awareness) eludes about 25% of middle-class first graders; if we restrict consideration to children who do not come from literacy rich

backgrounds, that number is much higher" (p. 210). If this concept is not understood by a quarter of our middle-class first grader students, imagine how few kindergarten children just entering school possess this awareness.

Research stresses the importance of children understanding the concept of phonemic awareness before formal reading instruction occurs. Yopp (1992) argued that this concept is best promoted in young children through word games and recitation of songs, poems and nursery rhymes. Yopp further explained that activities designed to develop phonemic awareness in young children should be fun, developmentally appropriate and connected to reading.

Based upon this summary of current research, the issue for primary educators becomes one of assuring that all children participate in pre-literacy experiences during their pre-school and kindergarten years. Adams (1990) stated, "We are left with the conclusion that the likelihood that a child will succeed in the first grade depends, most of all, on how much she or he has already learned about reading before getting there" (p. 8). This impresses upon preschool and kindergarten teachers the need to provide an abundance of pre-literacy experiences in their classrooms, along with daily exposure to children's literature.

Reading To Children

Research strongly supports the need for reading to children daily (Reissner, 1996). One way to promote reading success with young children is by reading to them daily throughout their childhood (Reissner, 1996; Trachtenburg, 1990). Heibert et al. (1998) stated that this daily exposure to texts improves children's vocabulary growth and comprehension abilities.

Many children have been read to on a daily basis prior to entering school. Aside from learning letter names and shapes, these children have also developed a basic understanding of the concepts of print. Fisher (1991) identified the four categories of concepts of print which children learn during story time as book knowledge, directionality, visual conventions, and auditory conventions. The individualized interaction with books and stories provides children with a solid foundation of many skills which they will later use to successfully learn to read and write. Students develop an awareness of the cueing systems through exposure to books. Fisher (1991) identified three cueing systems: semantic, syntactic, and grapho-phonemic cues. Children learn to "create and comprehend realities beyond the here and now, realities that depend for their existence entirely upon language,"(Adams & Bruck,

1995, p. 14) when they participate in pre-literacy experiences in their homes.

Unfortunately, many children have not had the opportunity to listen to stories in their homes. Researchers conclude that some groups of children rarely interact with story books prior to entering school (Adams, 1990; Teale, 1987). Reissner (1996) stated that those children who come to school without exposure to books and literacy experiences begin their formal education at a distinct disadvantage to their peers. They have not had the exposure to words, story structures, or concepts of print and cueing systems that many of their classmates have had. Trachtenburg (1990) writes, "Research has shown that children absorb the language they hear and read, and in time, use that language as part of their own" (p. 649). Barr, Blachowicz, and Sadow (1995) argued that many children develop an understanding of how and why people read and write through participation in reading and writing activities. Combine this with the notion that students need methodical phonics instruction, and we are left with the assumption that good instruction comes from teaching letters and sounds implicitly as they occur in children's literature. Trachtenburg (1990) concluded that this combination approach will develop students who not only can read, but also who choose to read for pleasure.

Holdaway (1979) voiced these same conclusions by stressing the importance of previous experiences with books as one key to reading success. He asserted, "Children with a background of book experience since infancy develop a complex range of attitudes, concepts, and skills predisposing them to literacy. Such children are all set up for reading and writing - they are ready to go" (p. 49). Children with book experiences show us that they are ready to go by "rereading" familiar books over and over again, and these rereadings have a facilitative effect on literacy acquisition (Teale & Martinez, 1988).

Many studies have been conducted to connect the positive effects of reading to children with their later reading success. In one such study, low-income children in grades one through three were read to daily from books that were more advanced than their reading level. These children made more gains in word recognition, comprehension, and word meanings than did the children in the control group (Indrisano & Chall, 1995).

A similar study produced significant gains in reading based upon sending books home with children. In this study books were sent home with three- and four-year-old preschoolers from low socio-economic homes. This simple intervention of providing parents with books and requesting

that they read them with their children produced significant effects on reading achievement, which remained significant at the end of first grade (Stahl, 1997).

In another study, Manning (1992) connected the amount of reading time in the home to reading success in school. She interviewed 70 kindergarten children from diverse backgrounds to identify differences in the children's knowledge of common forms of print. Her study revealed that suburban children were read to more frequently and had a much greater knowledge concerning letters, books, and concepts of print than did urban students. Manning's discussion argued the need to stress the importance of reading to urban parents.

This section of the review of research demonstrated the importance of reading to children daily. Children who are provided with daily exposure to books and stories develop into readers with much more speed and ease than do their peers that lack this reading background. Educators are left with the question of how to best assist their students who have not been read to throughout their childhood.

Early Intervention

In contrast to the 2000 to 3000 hours of pre-literacy experiences that most students bring with them to school, many children, especially those from lower socio-economic

homes, have had less than fifty hours of these same activities. This places the students behind their classmates in acquiring concepts of print and phonemic awareness (Adams, 1990).

It is imperative that educators discover ways to compensate for these missed experiences. Reissner (1996) argued that the best way to break this cycle of failure among low socio-economic students is to provide remediation as early as possible. Adams (1990) argued, "Unless ways are found to compensate for these differences in preschool literacy preparation, such children are unlikely to succeed with formal reading instruction" (p. 8). The problem is not lack of intelligence or ability, it is simply that children come to school with differing amounts and types of pre-literacy experiences. These are typically the same children who have not been exposed to stories and have not yet developed the concept of phonemic awareness. These are the children who are often labeled "at-risk."

Labeling a child "at-risk" means that they are at-risk of school failure. Walker-Dalhouse (1993) identified these students as "individuals who for a number of reasons - economic, social, developmental, and/or cultural - do not or probably will not do well academically despite their potential to learn" (p. 24). Walker-Dalhouse warned against

labeling children as it often places blame on the child, the family or the school. Goodman (1986) also warned against labeling children as at-risk or disadvantaged. Once labeled, they get even less of the needed experiences because teachers feel a pressure to provide them with intense skill and drill instruction. This places them further behind their peers because this skill oriented approach to reading instruction has not proven successful with many low-income, urban children (Manning, 1992).

Some research on direct, explicit instruction disagrees with Manning's findings concerning how to best help the children coming to school lacking in pre-literacy experiences. Calfee & Drum (1986) stressed the importance of intensive instruction in phonemic analysis to help students achieve independence in word recognition. Chall (1987) agreed, "Research evidence over the past 70 years indicates overwhelmingly that direct, explicit instruction in phonics is needed and contributes to better development of decoding, word recognition, and comprehension" (p. 8). Gersten and Carnine (1986) had a similar argument and stated that direct, explicit instruction was a systematic approach to the teaching of phonics. They stated that children need direct, explicit instruction on matching sounds to words.

When pre-literacy experiences are analyzed, the

majority of activities do appear to focus upon letters and sounds. By definition, these experiences also focus upon concepts of print awareness (Adams, 1990). What children who are labeled at-risk lack are the basic understandings of concepts of print and phonemic awareness that allow students to isolate, segment, and blend the letter sounds once they can identify them. Fisher (1991) reported that aside from learning letters and sounds, children learn the purposes of print and gain a basic knowledge of words, word structures, story patterns, and letter recognition through their pre-literacy experiences.

Primary educators are receiving pressure to assure that all children are meeting with reading success by the middle of first grade (Adams, 1991). Honig (1996) expanded this argument by stating that the majority of children who are not successfully reading by the middle of first grade will continue to fall further behind their classmates. Iverson and Reeder (1998) agreed that the first two years of a child's formal literacy instruction are crucial to future success.

To assure that students are working on level by the time they reach the first grade, it is imperative that educators look to early intervention programs that will assist all students in successfully learning to read and

write. Juel (1994) argued this need for early intervention. "If students are not independently reading beginning materials by mid-first grade, they have only a slim chance of reading at grade level by third grade and beyond unless they receive an extraordinary tutoring program" (p. 125).

Durkin (1993) suggested some strategies to assist all children in learning. She first recommended that teachers break instruction into "bite-sized" increments. "Some groups of students can move through a series of learning activities quickly while others need more time and smaller "bites" (p. xiii). She also recommended teaching children to think, rather than teaching them answers to questions. This is to prepare them to solve problems independently as they begin reading and throughout their education. Pikulski (1994) encouraged the integration of speaking and writing with reading instruction to assist all students in learning to read.

Though the concern for children to be reading on grade level by the end of first grade sounds reasonable, when contrasted with the fact that 30% to 40% of students in high-poverty areas are not able to read grade-level appropriate materials by the end of first grade, the complexity of realizing this goal becomes clear (Honig, 1996). To gain a better understanding of ways to assist

these students in learning to read and write, educators are beginning to look to the children themselves for some answers.

One kindergarten teacher interviewed each student in her classroom in an attempt to discover why that particular group had been so successful in literacy acquisition (Edwards, 1994). All of the children said that they could read, but most of the students had some difficulty describing what reading actually was. More than 75% said that they had learned to read in kindergarten, and that they learned to read by reading. Most of the children had difficulty identifying the reading strategies which they employed, but 60% of the children stated that they thought reading was easy. This finding contrasted with a study by Brumbage, where 50% of the 700 kindergarten children that she interviewed expected that they would learn to read in first grade, but thought that reading was going to be very hard (Stewart, 1992).

In another study conducted by Janice Stewart (1992) from Rutgers University, 129 kindergarten children were interviewed to investigate their awareness of how they were learning to read at home and at school. To connect their responses to achievement, students were given a reading test along with a series of interviews. The results of this study

showed that children could describe how they were learning to read, but that their understandings changed over time.

In a similar study, Jane Kita (1979) interviewed 20 kindergarten children concerning their knowledge of what it meant to read. She discovered that these children found the purpose of language to be abstract. The children also had a difficult time explaining their thoughts on the topic, though they had the beginnings of a metalinguistic lexicon. These notions were supported by previous research (Downing, 1970) stating that children have a vague understanding of literacy and lack the technical vocabulary to explain their opinions. Yet despite their developing vocabularies and fluctuating opinions, students were still able to provide insight into their understandings of literacy acquisition (Kita, 1979).

The research on emergent literacy stresses the need for early intervention to assure a quality education for all children. By providing at-risk students with exposure to both direct, explicit instruction and an abundance of children's literature, educators can begin to compensate for missed pre-literacy experiences while building a foundation for these students' future reading success. Tutorial programs designed to provide intensive individualized instruction are one method of providing this critical

intervention.

Another way to deepen our understanding of emergent literacy is to look at successful reading and writing tutorial programs as models for positive practices. Reading Recovery is currently one of the most successful reading programs in the United States for socially disadvantaged children (Pinnell et al., 1994). This reading program is based upon the concept of assisting children in learning at an accelerated rate to make it possible for them to catch up with their classmates. Select students in the first grade are provided with intensive one-on-one instruction on a daily basis. According to Pinnell et al., the individualized guidance provided in this program is one of the key factors that makes Reading Recovery so successful. The importance of one-on-one instruction is supported by previous research (Adams, 1990; Slavin, 1987).

When attempting to identify successful reading programs, it is important not to overlook the many tutorial programs that are computer based. Educators should utilize this teaching tool and discover the potential that technology has for improving classroom instruction. Levin (1986) identified the importance of this by reporting computers as being more cost effective than hiring adult tutors, increasing instructional time, or lowering class

sizes below twenty children. Levin also found computers to be especially useful in reading instruction. "Technology helps provide tools which, when coupled with innovative methods, can help children who are experiencing difficulty learn to read" (p. 3).

One successful computer based literacy program is the Waterford Early Reading Program. This program was specifically designed to compensate for the experiences that children miss if they are not exposed to the 3,000 hours of pre-literacy experiences described by researchers. Students spend 15 minutes each day on the computer, and receive 52 take home books and four take home videos that link learning between the school and their homes.

The Waterford Program had impressive preliminary research findings, and has continued to show student gains in the mastery of kindergarten skills (Heuston, 1996). In one evaluation, 558 Waterford kindergarten students were tested and compared with kindergarten children from six schools with comparable populations. The Waterford participants' averages were significantly higher in letter recognition and phonological awareness, and slightly but not significantly higher in concepts of print (Heuston, 1999). In a similar study 300 kindergarten students using the Waterford program were tested and compared to a control

group. Significant differences were found in favor of the experimental group (Heuston). An additional study revealed, "Positive impact on student reading performance both for all students and specifically for those students who were most at risk" (Heuston, p. 160).

One benefit of computerized instruction is that it can allow children to work at their own pace, and to be in control of their own learning. Research supports that as children's perceptions of their control of their own learning increases, so does their motivation to succeed (Alderman, 1990; Hoostein, 1996). Therefore, we assume that computers can assist teachers in providing motivational literacy activities. One study concerning the effects of computer based instruction upon student achievement rates showed great gains compared to a control group with no computer based instruction (Beyer & Dusewicz, 1991). During this three year study, over 600 students were provided with 30 minutes of daily computer based instruction. The second and third year achievement results showed significant gains for all grades in both math and language. Student attitudes towards using the computers were also reported as positive.

Educators can chose from a variety of materials, programs, and methods when designing emergent literacy instruction for their classrooms. Computer based literacy is

a relatively new field, providing an open arena for research. Whether we turn to computers, current programs, previous research, or to the children themselves, the one thing that is clear is that we don't have all of the answers concerning emergent literacy.

African-American Students

One population of children that is especially in need of quality literacy instruction is urban, African-American children. The educational plight of this particular group of students is a major concern for educators today. "Data on suspensions, expulsions, retention, and dropout rates indicate that far too many Black and Hispanic youth are being 'distanced' from mainstream America" (Kuykendall, 1992). And this distancing is a problem for our entire nation.

According to the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy (NCTPP, 1990), "Human talent is the cornerstone of our social and economic future" (p. 1). Not just the human talent that is white and European American, which is what our schools currently seem to be focusing upon, but all human talent. James Banks (1991/92) stressed, "The growing number of people of color in our society and schools constitutes a demographic imperative educators must hear and respond to" (p. 33).

The reasons that we must hear and respond become clear when we look at the educational success rates of urban, African-American children in our schools today. A greater number of African-American students drop out than do white students; 12.6% compared to 7.7% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1996). Edwards (1992) stated that the current achievement gap between African-American and white children dictates a need for refurbishing our educational system. Edelman (1987) stated that black children as compared to their white counterparts are three times as likely to be placed in an educable mentally retarded class. Kuykendall (1992) concurred with Edelman's statistics on this type of placement and stated that black children are only one-third as likely to be identified as gifted. Kuykendall (1992) added that black children are also three times as likely as white students to be suspended from school. Snow et al. (1998) expressed a similar concern:

> A major source of urgency in addressing reading difficulties derives from their distribution in our society. Children from poor families, children of African American and Hispanic descent, and children attending urban schools are at much greater risk of poor reading outcomes than are middle-class, European-American, and suburban

children. (p. 27)

These poor reading outcomes often lead to retention, another area where African-American children lag behind their peers. Roderick (1995) provided statistics on the percent of students that were six years old in 1984 that were enrolled in a grade below that of their appropriate age level. When the students were six, 12.3% of the African-American students were at least one grade behind, compared to 11.1% of white children. By age nine this gap grew to 32.6% for African-American children and 26% for white children. The gap grew even larger by age 14 with 41.8% of African-American students being below grade level as compared to 29.4% of white students.

People are concerned about retention rates because of the correlation between drop out rates and retaining students. Roderick (1995) argued that one grade retention increases a student's chances of dropping out by 40 to 50%. Two grade retentions increases this percentage to 90. Retention and drop out rates are disproportionately high for African-American students.

According to a census population survey by the U.S. Department of Commerce (1996), in 1994 African-American students had a 12.6% drop out rate compared to only a 7.7% for white children. Though this percentage has improved from

the 22.9% drop out rate for African-Americans in 1975, the number is still high in comparison to that of the majority population.

Standardized test scores are another critical area where African-American children are performing below their white peers. The NCTPP (1990) reported the overall finding that, on average, minority group members do score below white students on most standardized tests. Sulzby, Branz & Buhle (1993) concurred with these findings and stated that poor African-American children's test scores lag behind white children's in all areas, but particularly in reading. Their scores even lag behind those of other minority groups. This disparity among test scores is of great concern to educators at the present time, as test scores are considered by many to be the only true measure of educational success.

Another concern over test scores deals with the push to teach African-American students to do well on the tests. Bracey (1993) found that schools with more than a 65% minority population were most likely to place pressure on teachers to raise test scores. Bracey argued that, "Such pressure would be acceptable if the tests were worth teaching to - that is, if they measured knowledge and skills that people deemed truly valuable" (p. 111). The fear is that we are placing these students' even further behind by

spending so much time focusing upon low level thinking activities which will supposedly prepare them for the tests. When students continually score poorly on tests and remain unsuccessful in school, they often do not see any point in trying their best at school or of remaining a part of the educational system.

Constant negative feedback is only one of the many reasons why at-risk groups tend to experience school and reading failure. According to Cronan et al. (1996) other reasons include:

> Specific parental behaviors, the unavailability of reading materials, educational processes in the home, parent/child interactions, inter-generational beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, parental attitudes toward education and emergent literacy, and deficiencies in the school system. No one factor, including the often-cited socio-economic status, leads to scholastic failure. (p. 252)

Another reason that urban, African-American children often do not meet with school success is the differing views that their parents maintain about learning to read. Many urban, African-American parents view learning to identify the letters of the alphabet as the first step in reading. Interview responses from one study (Harry, Allen, &

McLaughlin, 1996) found that African-American parents saw no real purpose in pre-literacy activities until students had already mastered their alphabet. So these parents were not reading to their children or engaging them in letter games, because they did not feel that their children were ready for these types of activities. "Most parents tended to assume that repetition and drill would accomplish the desired goals" (Harry et al., p. 197).

As part of that same study, African-American parents in one urban school were interviewed to identify their perceptions of effective teaching at the preschool and kindergarten levels (Harry et al., 1996). Thirty-six parents were interviewed once a year over a three year period. Most of the parents agreed that their ideas of good teaching were based upon the ways in which they themselves had been taught. The most reported qualities were firm classroom management, structured teaching, and regular homework. Parents also identified ways in which they believed their children learned to read. They believed children began with saying and then recognizing the ABC's, then learning sounds, and finally words. None of the parents reported reading books to their children, singing nursery rhymes, or playing letter or word games as ways in which they helped their children at home.

A further difficulty for urban, African-American children to overcome is the apparent lack of congruence between home and school practices. Metsala (1996) conducted a study to look at children's early literacy experiences in the home. One finding was that in homes where literacy was taught as pleasure and fun, the children tended to have greater knowledge of basic concepts of print. This was in contrast to the homes in which a great emphasis was placed on skills and rote memorization. When combining this information with the study cited above, one could conclude that more urban, African-American parents place a high value on skill and drill teaching, thus these children have a lower knowledge of concepts of print.

A similar study was conducted by Purcell-Gates, L'Allier and Smith (1995). Twenty urban families with low socio-economic status were observed to examine the literacy event occurring in the homes with children from four to six years of age. The researchers found that the majority of the students involved were not provided with many opportunities to experience literacy in the same ways as students from higher socio-economic status homes. This lack of literacy opportunities placed the children at a disadvantage at the start of school.

Urban, African-American children are often forced to

find ways to mesh their home culture with that of the school, or they feel pressured to choose between them (Hale-Benson, 1982). Joan Wink (1996) stated:

> When these children come to school and are made to feel that their language and culture are wrong, they are put in the position of having to choose between the high status dominant culture and their perceived low status heritage. Sadly, our society has forced the vast majority of students who do not belong to the dominant culture to make this choice. (p. 24)

This pressure to choose between home and school culture places these students at odds with the educational system from the start of their formal schooling.

Cultural discontinuity is the term used to describe conflict between home and school culture. Au (1993) stated that this mismatch between home and school cultures often results in misunderstandings between teachers and students, which lead to further educational problems for these children. Edwards (1992) discussed this cyclical history of educational problems faced by African-American children:

> For more than 30 years, researchers have been trying to explain why African-American children continue to lag behind White children in reading

> achievement. One can reasonably assume that these children, who were subjects in the early studies, are now parents and grandparents and that if the parents' experiences with school were unsuccessful, their children's experiences with school may also be unsuccessful. (p. 351)

Au (1993) encouraged teachers to be cultural mediators, guiding students smoothly between both home and school traditions.

Schools may even be largely responsible for the discontinuities that urban, African-American children face. Researchers argue that literacy practices in school are specifically designed to match the home practices of white, middle-class students (Gee, 1990). Dudly-Marling and Murphy (1997) argue the seriousness of this dilemma:

> In other words, schooling may be about learning, but schools are not just about learning. Schools are also implicated in producing and reproducing inequities related to race, class, gender and language by favoring knowledge and pedagogical practices that privilege the skills and experiences of middle- and upper-class students. (p. 461)

From high drop-out and suspension rates to low enrollment in advanced courses, African-American students do

not appear to be meeting with much success in our school system. Unless changes are made in our school system, it is unlikely that the educational plight of this population will improve. Encouraging family involvement in schools may be one step towards reversing this destructive trend and assuring quality education for urban, African-American children.

Family Involvement With Schools

Building a bridge between schools and communities is not a simple task, but it is one that educators are beginning to recognize as necessary. McCaleb (1994) stated that, "Children live their lives in two worlds: that of the home and community and that of the school. When these two worlds fail to know, respect, and celebrate each other, children are placed in a difficult position" (p. 26). Forming partnerships between families and schools is one way to overcome this dilemma.

Education Secretary Richard Riley announced in 1994 that 30 years of research suggests that family involvement effectively improves education performance. A recent trend across the country is the effort to link education, health, social services, and businesses and encourage families to become active participants in the making of appropriate educational choices for children. The implication is for

families and communities to share responsibility with the school for the education of children. Family and school partnerships provide the multiple perspectives that are needed to solve the problems facing our schools and society today.

Rather than looking to families as the source of our problems, educators are currently attempting to identify positive home factors which assist children in learning to read. Teale (1980) identified four home factors that are associated with early reading success. These are a range of available print materials, reading modeled by adults and older children in the home, readily available writing instruments, and having people in the home respond to their beginning attempts at reading and writing. According to Heuston (1996) of the Waterford Institute:

> One of the more interesting insights has been the recognition that it takes three workers to help a student become a successful reader -- parent, teacher, and student. And each of the three must do one-third of the work. (p. 707)

Due to parents being in control of 87% of a student's waking time through the end of high school, it is clear that we need to look to families as partners in creating school success (Walberg, 1984).

The types of activities that family members and students engage in at home have more impact upon academic success of children than any other variable, including family education or economic status (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). By realizing the importance of family partnerships and assisting parents with educational activities, schools can increase student academic success.

Research summaries unanimously agree that family partnerships raise achievement scores in all areas of the curriculum (Foster & Lovin, 1992; Gestwicki, 1987; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Rasinski, 1995; Shockely, Michalove and Allen, 1995). One study cited that students' scores on reading accuracy, language skills, and reading comprehension increased greatly in the elementary grades with active parental involvement (Duda & Green, 1995). In another study, students in grades three and five showed significant gains on reading test scores when parents worked with their children at home (Epstein, 1992).

In addition to increased test scores, when families are involved as partners in their children's education students also achieve higher grades (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). The increase in scores and grades is attributed to the fact that these students have higher levels of school attendance and complete their homework more frequently than

students whose families are not actively involved.

Programs targeted towards forming home and school partnerships have had great success in promoting student achievement. Out of 29 studies conducted between 1974 and 1984, 91% have shown positive results for the students participating in programs which involved their families in the learning process (Walberg, 1984).

One program that is an example of successfully creating home and school partnerships is the Grant School in Chicago (Walberg, 1984). Here members of the families were involved in setting the goals for their school, and everyone, parents included, signed contracts agreeing to their individual responsibilities in helping their children to succeed. This act of involving the families and giving them an important role in their children's education led to increased student achievement rates.

Another program that showed student gains from home and school partnerships was targeted at providing families with effective methods for assisting their children in becoming readers (Cronan, et al 1996). Two hundred and eighty-nine Head Start families were divided into a control group receiving no training, and two experimental groups receiving either three or 18 hours of instructional visits on ways to help their children emerge as readers and writers. Children

in the 18-hour group showed the greatest gains in both language and conceptual development, but little difference was found between the groups receiving three or zero hours of training. This study supports the wealth of research indicating that community programs can greatly assist educators in countering the problems of low literacy that are disproportionally affecting low-income children.

In addition to these academic gains, family partnerships have also provided a multitude of benefits for students and their families. Students demonstrated improved behavior and more positive attitudes towards school when their parents were involved in the education process (Duda & Green, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Involved families voiced contentment with their children's schools. They developed more friendly relationships with school personnel and became more knowledgeable about ways to academically assist their children (Duda & Green, 1995). As their children became more successful in the school setting, parents began to see themselves as critical components of their children's education. Their feeling of self-worth improved, and they often continued their own education or applied for jobs that they had not previously considered (Duda & Green, 1995).

Families may be actively involved in the educational

process in several ways. These range from newsletters that are sent home, to programs that bring parents into the schools. Each of these initiatives serves a purpose in helping to form home and school partnerships.

Class newsletters are one simple way to keep communication going between the school and homes. A monthly newsletter helps keep families informed about activities occurring in the community, at school and in the classroom. These newsletters can communicate educational goals, teacher expectations, and information about current classroom events and routines (Berger, 1995). This written communication informs parents of school happenings and demonstrates an interest in family involvement.

Telephone systems are another tool for connecting schools and homes. Homework hotlines, teacher voice mailboxes and personal phone calls are all ways to make the school much more accessible to families. Telephone services provide parents with a means of gaining information when transportation to the school is inconvenient or unavailable.

Family resource centers are one way to bring parents into the schools. These centers can provide parents with workshops and information on health and safety, discipline, guidance, and educational issues. In addition, parenting videos, books and brochures can be made available for

parents to check out and view at home.

Through the use of mini-units, parents are provided with materials and ideas for working with their children. Mini-units are self-contained resource packets that hold books and materials for families to use at home with their children. The units are interactive, participatory kits that involve family members in the students' learning process, and make the time that parents and children share at home a learning experience (Becker & Epstein, 1982). Mini-units empower families to help their children become more successful through practice and reinforcement of skills taught during the school day.

Placing parents on governance committees is one way to actively involve them in the decision making processes of our schools. James Comer, a Yale University psychiatrist working on reform schools that serve minority children, believes that parents must play a major role in all areas of school governance and management. Comer (1987) argued that by involving parents, schools can reduce parental distrust while promoting democratic ideals. If partnership programs are to be successful, family members and other key stake holders must have opportunities to participate in setting school policies and decisions concerning school improvement goals.

Teachers play a critical role in the formation of family partnerships. Any study concerned with the daily occurrences in the classroom needs to include the thoughts and actions of the classroom teacher. Teachers are the decision makers that set the tone and the plan for each day of learning. Britton (1987) indicates that teachers make more than one hundred decisions in every lesson. To make these decisions teachers must rely upon their own previous training and understandings of how best to support their students.

Teachers may need special training to ensure that they are prepared to work with families (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Very few teachers have been trained in appropriate ways to include families in the educational process (Foster and Loven, 1992). Although teachers reported fairly positive attitudes about involving parents, many felt inadequately prepared to implement a classroom volunteer program (McBride, 1990). Teachers, like parents, need formalized instruction if partnerships are going to be successful.

Making parents feel welcome in our school is a first step to ensuring family involvement. According to Purkey (1991), parents need to feel that school is "the most inviting place in town" (p.2). Edwards (1992) stressed that

this is a particularly critical component of any program attempting to involve African-American parents.

In schools reporting high levels of family involvement, teachers reported more positive feelings about their schools and about teaching as a profession. These teachers were not as likely to stereotype parents when working together in a partnership (Epstein, 1992). The overall school climate and community relations also showed improvement when families were involved in schools (Duda & Green, 1995; Epstein, 1995).

Although the primary responsibility of the school is instruction, social and psychological dimensions of students' lives cannot be ignored. Up until recently, collaboration among the school and the family has been rare (Epstein, 1995; O'Hair & Odell, 1994). Developing an integrated, accessible system of support for children and their families is a relatively new and revolutionary concept that requires a reconceptualization of networks among schools, families and community agencies (Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995; Neuman, Celano, & Ficsher, 1996). Teachers and parents play a critical role in this revolution. It is important that successful strategies for forming these school and family partnerships continue to be examined. The future of our children depends upon it.

Conclusion

It is evident that emergent literacy is an important topic for educators today. The real dilemma facing teachers is how to reach the many students that are failing to learn to read successfully. With the majority of students not attaining literacy success being urban, African-American, it is essential that we look to partnerships with their families to improve the educational inequities currently being faced by this group. To successfully teach all students today one thing is clear: teachers and schools cannot educate these children alone. If parents are their child's first teacher, then it is time that parents and teachers begin working together to assure the academic success of all of our children.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine student, parent and teacher perceptions of emergent literacy and to explore the relationships between these perspectives. Using the review of literature as a knowledge-base, this chapter of the dissertation describes the methodology used while conducting the study. Chapter three identifies researcher biases; justifies the selection of methods and subjects; describes procedures for data collection, recording, interpretation and analysis; and discusses the problems which were encountered during the research process.

Point of View

As a kindergarten teacher for the past nine years, my area of interest lies with children in the primary grades. Because eight of my 10 years of teaching have taken place in an urban setting, I am particularly interested in the learning behaviors of African-American children. Over the past several years, I have focused my professional development on the area of emergent literacy with minority

children. I was trained as an early literacy instructor by my school district and serve as a literacy coach for the University of North Florida (UNF). I currently teach reading and language arts methods courses at the UNF and engage in consulting initiatives. I list these positions to explain that I came to this project with many of my own ideas and biases concerning emergent literacy, especially in relation to urban, African-American students.

Though I undertook this study with many of my own preconceived notions, my goal was to set these opinions aside and attempt to allow the perspectives of the participants to come through. My desire was to understand how students, parents and teachers make sense of their own emergent literacy experiences. Do they see the literacy activities that are occurring in classrooms as being effective? If so, in what ways? How do they see these activities assisting the students in becoming readers and writers? Spradley (1979) stated:

> I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way that you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. (p. 34)

His words eloquently described my own goals for this study.

Case Study

The most appropriate approach for answering my research

questions was a qualitative design. A case study was the logical selection, with interviews as the main method of data collection. Merriam (1988) described this particular methodology as being the preferred choice when looking at contemporary events that the researcher can not manipulate. As I was trying to understand, not control, what was occurring in one classroom, a case study approach was most appropriate.

As Peshkin (1982) pointed out, personal taste is also a deciding factor in selecting research methodology. I personally enjoy interacting with people. Therefore topics which interest me tend to require qualitative methods. Peshkin also described the beauty of the literary style used in qualitative reports to "powerfully portray and illuminate concepts and relationships" (p. 53). I, too, find this technique very appealing and was interested in depicting the different understandings that students, parents and teachers hold of the emergent literacy process, as well as the relationships among these perspectives.

Participants

Based upon my personal areas of interest, I decided to focus my interviews upon one kindergarten classroom in an urban, predominantly African-American school. By selecting

one classroom, a good rapport was established with the students and teacher, therefore improving the quality of the information which was shared during our interview sessions (Merriam, 1988).

My next decision was in selecting the school site. Based upon previous experiences with this staff and the literacy initiatives occurring in their school, I selected one urban elementary school in Duval County, Florida. The literacy initiatives occurring at the school included the utilization of the Waterford Early Reading Program, teacher enrollment in an early literacy course, the implementation of a parent initiative, and teacher participation in Wright Group literacy training. A few years ago I had the opportunity to work with this principal and many of her teachers on an extensive project with the University of North Florida. I had also given workshops for this staff and knew that they were comfortable talking and working with me. Therefore, I was well received in this setting, was already familiar with the administration and teachers, and had no difficulty gaining the entry into the chosen environment which Merriam (1988) described as a crucial starting point in qualitative research. I had also previously learned many of the informal rules and expectations of this institution and did not need to spend time learning appropriate

behaviors.

The implementation of literacy initiatives was my second reason for selecting this school as the focus of my study. These literacy projects centered around the use of a computer based learning package called the Waterford Early Reading Program (WERP). Aside from this pilot project, the school supported a strong family involvement initiative occurring, as well as a focus upon teacher training. These conditions provided discussion topics for my interview sessions.

When selecting my school site, one of the deciding factors was the anchor pilot project of the WERP. This program was highly research based and stressed the aspects of early literacy which Adams (1990) identified as necessary for reading success. Adams served as a consultant for the development of WERP and each of the computer modules were designed to follow her identified sequence of pre-reading skills (Stahl, 1997). One of the main objectives of the WERP was to assist students in developing the basic understanding of phonemic awareness. By implementing the pilot project with urban, African-American children, this school was targeting the students most in need of special assistance (Adams, 1990). The focus upon phonemic awareness had the potential for providing a wealth of insight into the views

of students, parents and teachers concerning the processes of literacy acquisition.

I was also interested in gaining insight into the participants' views on alphabet letter identification, another component of the WERP. The computer segments were designed to teach one alphabet letter at a time, and corresponding books were provided for each student to take home upon completion of the matching computer selection. Because letter recognition serves as a predictor of reading success (Stahl, 1997), this focus upon alphabet letters provided more insight into the participants' views of emergent literacy.

The collection of books provided by the WERP was another reason that I selected my chosen site for the focus of my study. According to research, the books supplied by the Waterford program may have assisted students in a number of ways. Numerous researchers have supported the idea that early interaction with books and reading promotes success in literacy acquisition (Adams, 1990; Cronan et al., 1996; Hopkins, 1998; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Adams (1990) indicated that "immersion - right from the start - in meaningful, connected text is of vital importance" (p. 10).

The fact that the WERP was a computer-based program was also of interest to me. Clement (1981) found that students

consistently had positive attitudes towards working on computers and that they were typically motivated to complete instructional tasks in this manner. Opinions on computerized instruction provided more discussion topics for both student and parent interview sessions.

The family involvement initiative was another reason for selecting this particular school. Though research confirms the risks that low socio-economic, urban children face, the creation of home-school partnerships provides hope for these children's success. Toomey (1991) stated that, "Family environment processes are more influential than socio-economic status in influencing children's scholastic learning" (p. 3). In light of the research on urban, African-American children today, this type of partnership is more important than ever. Therefore, the family involvement initiative was an issue which I wanted to discuss with all of my participants.

My decision to question students, parents and teachers was based upon my goal to provide a clear picture of views on emergent literacy from a variety of perspectives. Seldom researched in our schools today is what students think about themselves as readers and writers, and about the procedures that are used for instruction (Van Galen et al., 1988-89). Rowland (1984) stated the importance of this by saying, "Any

explanation of the learning process must concern itself with the children's intentions, their interpretations and the thinking they bring to bear upon their activities" (p. 2).

The need to talk with children was inspired by a study which I conducted during a qualitative research course. I was fascinated with the insights provided by my five-year-old kindergarten students. I was further convinced of the importance of this type of study when reading a scenario by Cunningham (1995):

> Imagine you are visiting in a first-grade classroom. You have a chance to talk with several children and ask them, "Why are you learning to read and write?" Some children answer, "You have to learn to read and write." When pushed, they can name all kinds of "real-world" products as reasons for reading and writing. Other children respond to the question with answers such as, "to do your workbook," "to read in reading group," and "to go to second grade." Children who give "school-world" answers to this critical question demonstrate that they don't see reading and writing as part of their real world. (p. 8)

After reading this scenario, I was fascinated by the possibility of understanding students' perceptions of how and why they were learning to read and write.

I was interested in talking with the students to appreciate their views. Beck and McKeown (1991) suggested that to better understand language acquisition we need to focus upon what children are actually learning rather than upon what teachers are attempting to teach. "It is this focus on the child (and how the child interacts with and makes sense of his or her own written communication) that seems to underlie the promising research in emergent literacy" (p. 761). As an educator I had a responsibility to attempt to gain this insight into the students' thinking. Rowland (1984) argued:

> But we are nevertheless in a position to relate closely to the children, to prompt their thinking and thereby to begin to reveal it, and so it is up to us to make the most of this privilege in order to gain insight into how we can best influence their learning. (p. 2)

Gaining this type of understanding was a major goal of this study.

A second objective of this study was to illuminate the voices of the parents and teachers as to how they view literacy acquisition. There is much research to support that what occurs in students' homes has an enormous impact upon school success. The perspectives of teachers were included

in this study because they also have a profound effect upon classroom success. "If change agents (teachers and parents) were willing and involved, knowledge about language use could proceed along a two-way path, from the school to the community, and from the community to the school" (Heath, 1982, p.125).

The main reason for deciding to interview parents was the current importance being placed upon home and school partnerships. A recent study by Cronan et al. (1996) provided evidence that community intervention programs that involve parent training can assist schools in reversing the current pattern of low literacy rates among low socio-economic groups. Toomey (1991) stated that once parents understand that there is a problem with their child's reading, they are very willing to become actively involved in helping the school to assist their child. My study was intended to provide one step towards encouraging this type of involvement.

Due to their impact upon student learning, teachers were included in the interviews and their perspectives were presented in this dissertation. Since they have such a profound effect upon the implementation of the literacy activities in the classroom, their insights were provided to create an accurate picture of what was occurring in this

school. In a summary report on the first year's implementation of the WERP, the evaluator (Stahl, 1997) stated, "The beliefs that teachers had about their role in the classroom, turned out to have a marked impact on their use of the Waterford computers" (p. 21). Parents, teachers and children all play vital roles in the education process, and all deserved to have their opinions heard.

The Interview Process

Once the principal of the selected school agreed to my study, I contacted the kindergarten teacher who the principal had identified and began making plans for my first set of interviews. A parental consent form (Appendix A) was sent home with all students, and the teacher followed up with phone calls to assure that all forms were signed and returned. Out of 19 students, 18 forms were returned. The remaining parent declined to sign the form.

Prior to my entering the classroom, the teacher discussed my visits and explained to the students why I would be working with them. Van Galen, Noblit and Hare (1988-89) stressed the importance of this openness before children are interviewed.

Upon entering the classroom for the first time, I took a small collection of books to read with the children for a shared reading activity. I wanted the students to become

familiar with me and perceive me as being friendly and easy to work with. By starting the morning in this participatory read along, I was introduced to the students in a fun and non-threatening manner. I then explained to the children why I was in their classroom, and that I would be talking with each of them as they worked at the computer station throughout the day.

At first, the student interviews were conducted while the children were working at the computers and while they were reading some of the books provided as supplemental materials by the WERP. Following Tovey's (1976) model, I asked students to explain how they decoded certain words after they had finished reading on the computer. This provided the students with a concrete experience to describe, rather than an abstract process. As kindergarten children are typically very concrete thinkers, it was unlikely that I would have gained much information from them by asking questions out of context concerning their thoughts on learning to read and write. By interviewing them as they worked on the computers, I was able to gain some insights into what the students believed was occurring while they were working.

My decision to conduct the interviews in the classroom setting was reinforced by reading previous studies where

students were interviewed (Hatch, 1988; Tovey, 1976). Though it made sense to me to talk with students while they were at school, Hatch (1988) provided a solid argument for my selection. "Children will feel more comfortable in the natural surroundings of their classroom than if they are taken away from teacher and peers and asked to spend time alone with a relative stranger" (p. 14). Hatch went on to argue that interviews in the classroom appear less formal than if a child is removed from this setting, and that students are more likely to be able to discuss concepts of learning in the context where instruction is taking place.

I interviewed each participating student a minimum of three times over a two month period. The first set of interviews took place on February 5, 1998, and the final set on April 9, 1998. During this time I visited the selected classroom on six different days, and interviewed parents and teachers during those same visits. The parents and teachers were interviewed one time each, for a total of three teacher and six parent interviews. Because the student interviews were much shorter in length than those of the adults, each student was interviewed at least once per visit and often three or four times in one day. A total of 226 student interviews were conducted during the six days of visitations. This spread of interviews allowed the students

to become comfortable with me over time and provided me with insight into their regular routines and behaviors. The time between interviews allowed me the opportunity to transcribe the previous interview sessions and to read over old notes before each subsequent session.

To assure the productivity of my interviews, I followed examples set by previous researchers. Modeling an example set by Sulzby (1977), I attempted to observe students performing a variety of literacy tasks. I talked with students as they worked at the computer station and at literacy centers around the classroom, immediately asking them to explain why they performed as they did. In an attempt to make the interviews as friendly as possible, I followed a model by Hanna (1982). She suggested dressing informally and sitting with the children in student size chairs or on the floor to make them feel most comfortable. All of my student interviews were conducted informally, with me circulating throughout the classroom and talking with individual children as they worked.

Parent and teacher interviews were held on the days when I was visiting the classroom. Parent interviews were conducted before school as parents stopped by to drop off their children. The teacher would explain who I was and ask them if they would mind talking with me for a few moments.

When this approach proved ineffective, we solicited the help of an assistant. The assistant began talking with parents and telling them that she knew me, and then my access to parents became much easier.

At first the parents seemed wary to speak with me. Once we began discussing their children, however, all of their resistance seemed to melt. Only two parents did not complete the interview sessions. One was unwilling to sign the release form, and the other would not agree to being taped. So of the eight that I attempted to interview, I interviewed six.

Parent interviews focused upon two groups of parents. One group was the set of parents that regularly volunteered in the classroom. I was able to interview all three of the teacher's regular classroom volunteers. These parents provided insight into their thoughts on classroom as well as home occurrences. The other set of parents were those whose children were in the selected classroom, but that did not regularly visit the school. These three parents were able to provide views on the children's literacy behaviors at home. All parent interviews were conducted at a table in the hallway outside of the classroom door.

The main teacher that I interviewed was the classroom teacher in the room which was selected for the study. She

was interviewed during two different sessions, one before school and one after school on that same day. This split was done due to lack of time prior to her students' arrival. The remaining two kindergarten teachers at the selected site were also interviewed to provide a sense of whether the behaviors and opinions of the main teacher were typical. These were done together one afternoon after the students had gone home for the day. All adult subjects signed the Adult Consent Form (Appendix B).

Because I was conducting numerous interviews, it would have been impossible to take accurate notes on all that was said during these sessions. For this reason, each interview was audio taped and then transcribed on a word processor for later analysis. A hard copy of these transcripts was kept in a three-ring binder along with research comments and log notes. Copies were also retained on my hard drive and disks. In order to check for errors, I replayed all of the interview tapes while reading the transcripts.

To protect the identity of my participants, I coded all data using a numeric system rather than with individuals' names. Following ethical principles related by Bogdan and Biklen (1992), "the subjects' identities should be protected so that the information you collect does not embarrass or in other ways harm them" (p. 54). In chapter four, participants

are given fictitious names to protect their identity. Even though the topics that were discussed during the interviews were not considered sensitive or controversial by nature, precautions were taken to assure the privacy of each participant.

I conducted all of the interview sessions. Hanna (1982) argued that observing what students see, touch, and smell, along with where and how they move, are extremely important aspects of the interview process. Therefore, by personally conducting the interviews, and by doing my own transcribing, I was able to take notes on many of these significant non-verbal behaviors as I transcribed the sessions each evening.

Though I did develop a list of questions that could provide me with insight into my participants' understandings of the emergent literacy process, I was careful not to use the list as a format for each of my interviews. Instead I questioned individuals on what was occurring at that moment and on comments which they made. Spradley (1979) suggested that researchers should develop guiding questions but allow the interview to flow from context, interaction and social rapport. Hanna (1982) made an argument for open-ended questions by stating that they bring to the surface whatever is on participant's mind rather than imposing the constructs of the interviewer. This open-ended style was my goal for

the interview sessions. To an observer the sessions would have appeared more like informal conversations rather than actual interviews. Some sample guiding questions which I used to begin my interviews with students included:

- Which activities on this computer do you think are helping you to learn how to read? How are they helping you?
- How is your reading improving?
- Are you learning how to read? How can you tell?
- What things can you do now that you couldn't do before you started school?
- Tell me how you figured out that word (after reading on the computer).
- Is reading on the computer easier than reading a book? If yes, why is it easier?
- Is this computer helping you to learn how to write? How is it helping you?
- Which is easier for you, reading or writing? Why is it easier?
- Why do you think that you can read all of these books?

Based upon the students' answers to these questions, I then let the interviews lead where ever each students' interests took us.

Parent questions focused more upon literacy behaviors which they had observed their child performing at home. The parents that were regular classroom volunteers were also asked to reflect upon behaviors which they had observed in the classroom. Sample questions included:

- Have you noticed your child trying to do any reading or writing at home?
- What types of reading have you seen him/her engage in?
- Is he/she trying to read any signs or labels?
- Does your child read the books provided by the WERP at home?
- Have you noticed your child singing songs or repeating any poems that he/she learned at school?
- What does your child like best about school, or talk the most about?

The interview questions for the teachers were very similar to the parent's questions, but focused upon ways in which they had observed the students interacting with literacy materials in their classrooms. Sample questions included:

- What things do you notice about the students as they are working at the computer stations?
- Which materials do you think are helping the

students to read and write? In what ways are they helping?

- In what ways do you see your students exhibiting different behaviors now that you have the WERP?
- Have the students' journaling abilities improved with the use of the WERP?
- Do you notice the students reading more now than before?
- Have there been any changes in story discussions?
- How are your parent volunteers assisting the students with literacy acquisition?

These sample questions were the starting point for the interviews, but subject responses determined the direction of the sessions.

Data Analysis

In a qualitative study such as this one, data analysis requires more than analyzing numbers. According to Merriam (1988), "In addition to coding units of data by obvious factors such as who, what, when, and where, analysis involves the development of conceptual categories, typologies, or theories that interpret the data for the reader" (p. 133). To analyze the abundance of information gathered during the interview sessions, an interpretive screen was constructed using the review of the literature as

a basis. Participants' responses were also examined to identify patterns and themes.

To analyze the participants' understandings of the ways in which the literacy activities were assisting the students in learning to read and write, some major themes kept reoccurring in the participants' responses. The broad themes centered around how and why children learn to read and write, and how computers promote this process. The dominant reoccurring topics which created the interpretive screen were: reading to children, direct, explicit instruction on alphabet letters, writing as a learning tool, the use of nursery rhymes, and working with children in the home.

In analyzing parent and teacher responses, I was particularly interested in the ways in which their perceptions of emergent literacy paralleled or contradicted current research concerning correlations between home factors and literacy success. Teale (1980) identified four home factors that are associated with early reading success. These were a range of available printed materials, reading modeled by adults and older children in the home, readily available writing instruments, and having people in the home respond to their beginning attempts at reading and writing. These categories emerged frequently throughout the interview sessions.

An outline was created using the topics identified above, and interview responses were organized within these themes. Once all data were categorized in this manner, the descriptions of findings could be reported and discussed.

Research Concerns

As a teacher who has been in a kindergarten classroom for the past nine years, I was well aware of the special considerations to be made when interviewing five- and six-year-old children. Van Galen, Noblit and Hare (1988-89) identified the need for these considerations. "Certainly, it is difficult to interview children, largely because their world views are quite unlike those of adults" (p. 81). The authors went on to state that it seldom helps to ask a child what they mean by a statement, but instead suggest asking them to give examples that might clarify their words. One problem that I originally encountered with the students was that they attempted to respond to me in ways that seemed appropriate. Children are so used to giving correct answers to adults in school settings that they responded during interviews with school talk rather than explaining how they actually felt about things (Van Galen, Noblit & Hare, 1988-89). To prevent this from happening, I reassured the students that there were no right answers to my questions, and that I just wanted to know what they were thinking. I

also asked them the same types of questions over the six days which I visited with them, and therefore could check the continuity of their responses over time.

Because the issues related to interviewing children were recognized prior to beginning the study, I was able to work through them during the interviews. Hatch (1988) stressed that problems related to interviewing children belong to the researchers, not the children. He stated that, "Children's perspectives and ways of understanding are not inferior and should not be thought of as 'getting in the way' of data" (p. 16).

Another issue which I faced was in listening to the participants views and accepting their thoughts for what they were, rather than trying to match them to my own understandings. Merriam (1988) stated that in case study research a person is not trying to find truth, but to eliminate misconceptions so that we are left with the best possible interpretation. And in this study it was the participants' interpretations that I was trying to illuminate, not my own.

I tried avoid placing the thoughts of the participants into my own preconceived ideas of emergent literacy. Instead, I sought categories and patterns within their own thinking. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) advised researchers to

"avoid jamming your data into preformed conceptual schemes" (p. 162). Because I have many thoughts of my own concerning emergent literacy, it was necessary to attempt to place these ideas to the side to gain an accurate understanding of the participants' perceptions.

A final issue which posed a problem in the study was the outsider disadvantages of access to data collection and analysis. According to Hanna (1982), "There is an assumption that a researcher should be of the same color, culture, group, or status in order to gain maximum understanding" (p. 341). Studies such as Williams and Morland (1976), however, found no differences in responses given to interviewers of a different color. Though I was confident having worked in this area for the past eight years that I could effectively talk with and listen to individuals from this school, I still had more difficulty than I previously anticipated. The students appeared to accept me easily, possibly because their teacher is also a white female. The parents, however, were a little more skeptical of me at first. I was an outsider with release forms and a tape recorder. Fortunately, with a little help from the teacher and an assistant, I was able to overcome this barrier.

Presentation of Results

The final write up of my findings is presented in a

narrative form in chapter four of this dissertation. Chapter four attempts to provide the thick descriptions discussed by Merriam (1988) in hopes of creating a mental picture for readers of the interpretations which were discovered. Readers must keep in mind that what is described in Chapter four are particulars, and that these particulars are where our theories concerning education should be grounded. According to Rowland (1984),

> Any attempt to set too great a distance between the descriptions of the particular and the theory which underlies or emerges from them will inevitably lead to theorization which is sterile, leaves the child and the classroom out of focus and can play little part in our practice of teaching children and understanding them. (p. 147)

After all, if teachers want to better understand how children and parents make sense of our instruction, where better to look than to these individuals themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

To explore the differing perceptions that students, parents and teachers in one urban setting held of emergent literacy, interviews were conducted over a two-month period of visitations to the kindergarten classroom selected for this study. Ms. Paige's classroom was selected based upon principal recommendation, and the two remaining kindergarten teachers were also interviewed to provide a sense of how typical the behaviors and opinions were of the selected teacher. Eighteen of Ms. Paige's 19 students returned parental consent forms and were interviewed for the study, along with six parents who also consented to be interviewed. The findings from these interview sessions are highlighted in this chapter, retold in the words of the participants.

Chapter four begins with a description of Ms. Paige's classroom and daily routine to acquaint the reader with the ways in which literacy was presented to the students in this study. The participants are then described along with the process through which students' comments were selected for

inclusion in this chapter. Five themes were identified as reoccurring topics from the interview sessions, and these are described in detail with participant responses provided to illustrate each issue. A summary of findings concludes this chapter.

Ms. Paige's Classroom

Upon entering Ms. Paige's kindergarten classroom, one feels a bit like Alice in Wonderland when she has grown too large for her surroundings. The classroom is full of miniature furniture and materials, all built to accommodate five-year-old children. The abundance of toys, books and pictures around the room is so captivating that it is difficult to decide where to look first. Upon exploration, there are notable patterns to the placement of materials in the classroom (Figure 1).

The students' cubbies line the back left wall. A housekeeping center, complete with kitchen, dining area and doll beds, nestles between the cubbies and two computers. At the far right hand corner of the classroom is a cozy reading nook containing books, stuffed toys and pillows. Following along the right wall is the Waterford computer center. An art table backs up to the computer center and outlines the large empty space in the right front corner used for morning time. In the center of the room are the reading table,

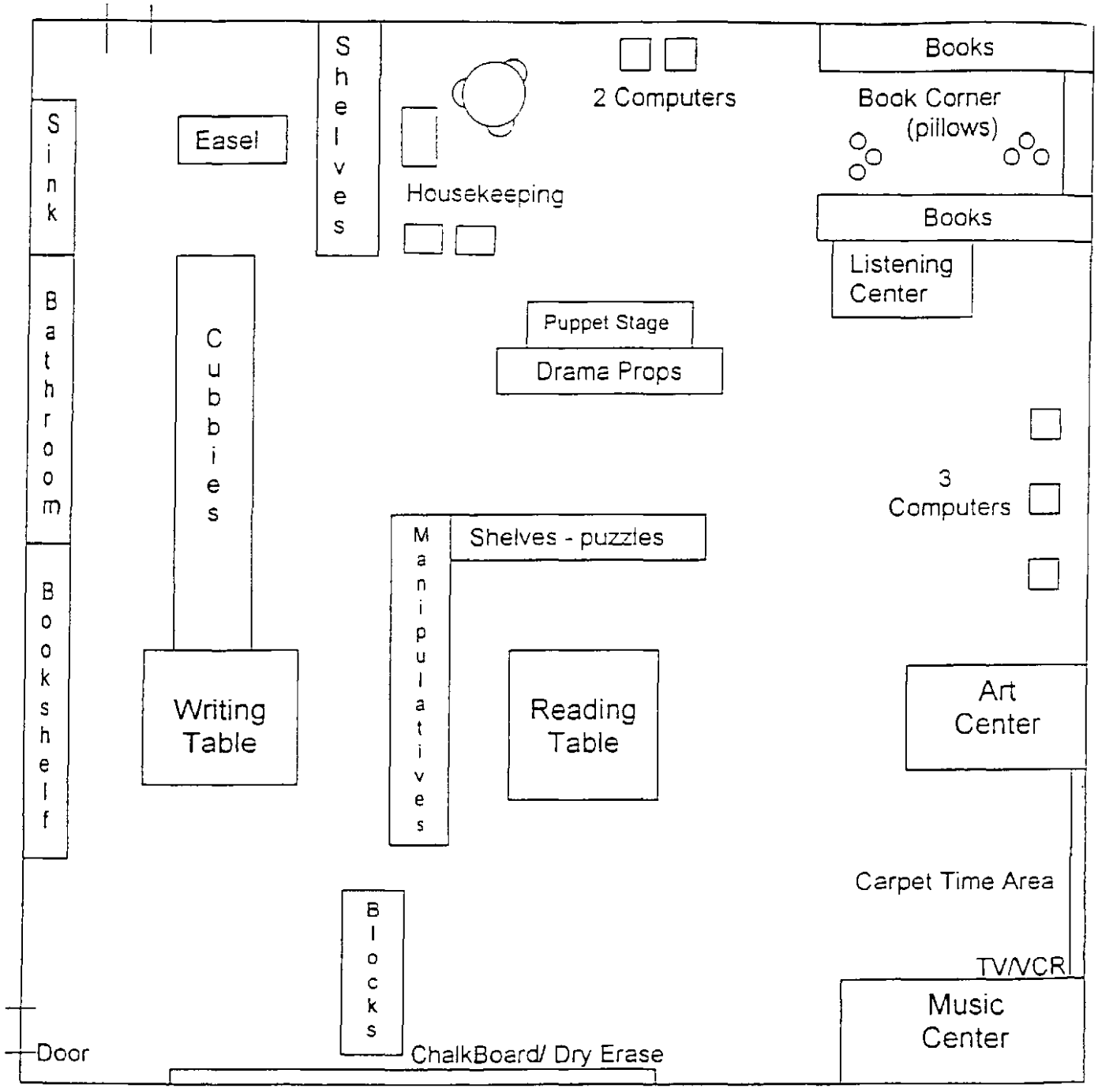

Figure 1: Ms. Paige's Classroom

writing table, and manipulative shelf. Students' art work and writing samples decorate the classroom walls.

Ms. Paige's classroom followed a daily routine. Once inside the door, children and visitors alike were greeted by a smiling teacher. Ms. Paige welcomed the students at the door each morning collecting hugs, notes, homework, and anything else which her students presented her with as they entered the classroom. The children immediately walked to their cubbies and deposited their personal belongings. Once their coats, lunches and other valuables were stored, the students sat on the carpet for morning time.

When her daily ritual of greeting children at the door was completed, Ms. Paige moved to the carpet area to talk with students until the announcements commenced. This morning time took about 15 minutes, which Ms. Paige explained provided students the opportunity to talk informally with her and one another while waiting for the announcements.

The morning announcements were broadcast over closed circuit television, allowing the students to watch as well as listen to the day's news. Students were expected to sit silently during this time. The length of the announcements ranged from seven minutes to 24 minutes throughout my visitations. The length of these seemed to impact the

attention span of the students for Ms. Paige's morning time.

Morning time followed the same pattern on each of my visits. Attendance was the first matter of business. Mrs. Paige called every child's name on the roll and said, "Good morning, Jamal." And Jamal would respond, "Good morning, Ms. Paige." This was done with every child to assure that the day began in a pleasant manner with a smile and greeting for each student. At the end of this ritual Ms. Paige rotated the clothes pins on the job wheel to identify her student helpers for the day. The messenger was then allowed to select a friend to join in walking the attendance sheet to the office.

Following the attendance, Ms. Paige focused upon the calendar and weather chart. During this time she reviewed numbers, days of the week, and weather conditions. The students discussed the weather conditions for that morning and the weather person for the day was allowed to dress their weather bear appropriately. The students appeared to know the pattern of Ms. Paige's questions for this activity and were typically eager to participate.

When calendar time was over, the letter and sound review began. Flash cards were used for a quick whole group drill on recognizing both upper and lower case letters. Following this drill students played a sound game. Ms. Paige

passed out a picture card to each student. They then took turns identifying their picture and placing it in the appropriate envelope. These were labeled A to Z and were hung beneath the chalkboard. The students played this game every morning with different pictures used each day.

To complete her morning time, Ms. Paige gave directions for the morning work tables. Students had two tables to complete, plus Ms. Paige's reading group. At the reading table students completed their Writing to Read workbooks for the day. The second table was the writing table, and it was monitored by a parent volunteer or the assistant who was present two mornings a week. Once directions were complete, the students were ready to begin their morning work.

A large chart on the wall directed students to their appropriate work tables. The class was divided into three groups: the high group was blue and had six members, the average group was green and had seven members, and the low group was red with six members.

On my first visitation, the blue group began at the reading table. Children went to computers while they were at this table. There were three Waterford computers, one Writing to Read computer and one computer with number and letter games. Because there were five computers in the classroom and six students in this group, two children

paired up on the computer with games and rotated into the Writing to Read computer as each child completed the word for that day. Once students completed their Writing to Read computer time (between five and 10 minutes), they moved to the reading table and completed their workbook section for the corresponding word. Three children worked on the Waterford computers during this time.

The green group began at the volunteer directed table. On this day the children were making a bus and filling in blanks for a structured writing activity: the _____ on the bus go _____. Most activities at the writing table included art skills as well as writing.

The red group was working with Ms. Paige in a Direct Instruction reading group. Here the children worked chorally chanting words from the 'at' family and naming the letters in each of the words. Students had twenty minutes to complete each table (a timer was set) before rotating to the next area. Once students had completed all three stations, it was time to clean up and prepare for lunch. Lunch time provided the opportunity for me to talk with the teacher and volunteers in an informal manner. During lunch the teacher scanned the students' morning work and Writing to Read workbooks, pulling out those she wanted to work with individually after lunch.

Following lunch Ms. Paige had a story time while students used the restroom. She then sent students to computers who had not been on them that morning and called the children that she and her volunteer or assistant would be working with. The rest of the students were allowed to work in their choice of centers.

This routine was followed on each of my visits to the classroom. Though I began my interviews by pulling a chair next to the Waterford computers and talking with students as they worked, I quickly started to move around the room to interact with students at work tables and centers as well. This variety of locations and materials added a richness to the information provided by the children.

Participants

To protect the identity of the participants, all of the names used to describe them are pseudonyms. The participants in this study fell into three main groups; students, parents and teachers.

Students

Though 18 students were interviewed to gather information on student perceptions of emergent literacy, the responses from six students are highlighted in this description of findings. Two children from each reading group were selected to represent the views of their

classmates.

Three groups of children are represented in this study. The blue group contained the more advanced students by Ms. Paige's evaluations. From this group Alex and Jamal were identified by Ms. Paige as two of her brightest students. Both knew all of their letters and sounds and were beginning to recognize some sight words. The green group contained Ms. Paige's average children. The two representatives from this group were Tiarra and Antonio. Both students recognized all of their alphabet letters and some sounds. Neither was recognizing sight words. The final group of children was the red group. This group contained the students that Ms. Paige feared were in danger of being retained in kindergarten. Alyssa and Jeffery were selected as representatives of this group.

Alex was the first child to greet me on my introductory visit to the classroom. With all of the confidence of one who knows he is well liked and respected, he introduced himself and politely questioned my presence in his classroom. Alex had recently turned six and spoke as if he were a miniature adult. He gave the impression of having a wisdom far beyond his years. Ms. Paige explained that he was the middle of three children and felt very responsible for his little sister. His mother was single and spent a lot of

time at work in the evenings. Ms. Paige worried that Alex was too mature for his age.

Jamal entered the classroom like a small tornado. His whole body seemed to be moving at once as he rushed by the teacher, ran his hand down the wall, knocked the book bag out of his classmate's arms and did a twirl in the air that resembled a pirouette. The amount of noise resonating from this tiny creature was enough to gain everyone's attention. Despite his chaotic noisiness, Jamal was an adorable boy. He was five years old and lived with his mother and older brother. Jamal was very small with medium brown skin and an almost shaved head. His most notable feature was his smile. No matter how loud or out of control his little body became, it seemed impossible for anyone to stay annoyed with him once they became the target of his impish grin. He was well-liked by his classmates and teacher, though she frequently had to remind him to follow the class rules. Throughout my visits, he winked and smiled every time he passed me, as though we shared some personal joke.

Tiarra was already six. She had a very early birthday and was slightly taller than most of her classmates. Ms. Paige confided that she was more mature than many of the children in her class. Tiarra lived with her mother and little sister. She was an attractive child with long black

hair and light brown skin. Her particularly large eyes and friendly smile gave the impression of a happy and trusting child. One look at Tiarra and there was no doubt that she was well cared for. If her clean appearance and well pressed clothes were not enough, then the fact that she never had one hair out of place told of the time that someone spent each morning preparing her for school. She wore at least 15 hair barrettes attached to individual braids around the circumference of her head. Tiarra was always dressed in new looking clothes with socks and barrettes, all 15 of them, changed to match each outfit.

Antonio was an average looking kindergarten child. He had dark brown skin, short black hair and big brown eyes. He was typically dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, and very nice tennis shoes. His clothes were clean and new, yet always a little crooked, as though he had just finished a wrestling match. Antonio liked to play rough with the boys in class, though he was not one to fight or pick on other children. Antonio had the kind of personality that lights up a room. He was very sure of himself and talked openly about his life and his family. Antonio was an only child and lived with both his mother and father. Antonio was extremely proud of his father who was a police man. He wanted to do well in school to follow in his father's foot steps. Throughout most

of our interview sessions, Antonio was laughing and teasing with me.

Alyssa was a shy and quiet child. Ms. Paige described her as having excellent behavior. She was average size and build, with light brown skin and short black hair in corkscrew curls that looked as though she had just removed her curlers. She lived at home with her mom, dad and two younger siblings. Alyssa seldom participated in class discussions, but talked and worked well with her classmates. Ms. Paige confided that she didn't believe Alyssa was going to be promoted. Her low maturity level was as big of a concern to Ms. Paige as her deficient academic skills. Alyssa was usually willing to talk with me but was often unable to supply verbal responses to my questions.

Jeffery was a very active little boy. His hands and feet were always quietly clapping and stomping to some beat, as if he heard music in his mind. Though he could speak intelligibly when it suited his needs, this mood seldom struck. Ms. Paige was very concerned about his progress and feared that he may need to be tested for learning disabilities. Jeffery was an only child living with his grandmother. If academically unsuccessful, he was socially competent. Though often a loner, he played well with others and appeared to be happy most of the time. Jeffery almost

always wore a smile that looked as if he was keeping a secret.

Parents

Six parents were interviewed for this study, three of whom were weekly volunteers in Ms. Paige's classroom. All of the parent participants were female, four were single and only one worked outside of the home. Very few personal questions were asked of the parents, therefore the description of each is brief.

The three classroom volunteers were Mrs. Williams, Mrs. Thomas and Ms. Coleman. Mrs. Williams was a grandmother of one of the little girls in the class. She lived at home with her daughter and two granddaughters. Mrs. Williams had previously been a Sunday School teacher and has volunteered one day a week in each of her granddaughters' classrooms since her husband passed away.

Mrs. Thomas had a daughter in Ms. Paige's class and an older son in the fourth grade. She appeared to be in her late 20's. Her husband worked in construction, and she considered her children to be her work. Like Mrs. Williams, she also volunteered one day a week in each of her children's classrooms.

Ms. Coleman appeared to be in her early 30's. She had a son in the class and a son in second grade. Her husband had

recently passed away. She volunteered at the school three days a week, which she stated kept her busy and in touch with her children.

The remaining three parents were Ms. Jackson, Ms. Hart and Ms. Jones. Ms. Jackson was a single mother in her late 20's. She had a son in the class. Ms. Hart was the only parent interviewed that worked outside of the home, working as a secretary for a small business. She was a single mom with a son in the class who was an only child. Ms. Jones was also a single mother with a little girl in the classroom. She appeared to be in her early 30's.

Teachers

Ms. Paige was the teacher in the kindergarten classroom selected as the focus of this study. She was a white female in her early 40's. Ms. Paige was soft spoken, conservatively dressed, and usually wore a smile. She was married with two teenage daughters living at home. Ms. Paige had taught kindergarten for 15 years. She had been employed at this school for four years and had taught the seven years prior at another urban school. Her remaining four years of teaching were in another state. She had the very patient manner and gentle way of speaking that comes with many years of working with small children.

The two remaining kindergarten teachers at the school

were also interviewed for this study. Ms. Hamilton was a single, white female in her late 30's. She had taught at this school for three years, and had a total of 12 years experience. Mrs. Sanders, also a white female, was in her mid 30's with 10 years of teaching experience and two children of her own. She had been at this school site for five years. All three teachers were very confident in discussing what they believed about how children learned to read and write.

Themes

Throughout the interview sessions with the participants, five themes emerged, each of which is examined in this chapter:

Theme 1. What counts as reading and writing?

Theme 2. Why do children learn to read and write?

Theme 3. How do children learn to read and write?

Theme 4. The use of computers for literacy instruction

Theme 5. Working with children in their homes

All five themes are discussed in the following section in the words of the students, parents and teachers.

The five themes listed above were the most commonly discussed issues during the interview sessions. In presenting each of these themes, patterns and similarities among participants' responses are highlighted as well as

differing views. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) stated that "divergent and dissonant views are themselves a story" (p. 209). Throughout this study, insight was gleaned from individual opinions as well as shared group opinions.

What Counts as Reading and Writing?

Before attempting to identify participant views on emergent literacy, a good starting point was to understand their personal definitions of reading and writing. To discover what children counted as reading and writing, three types of questions were asked. The first approach was to ask the children which students they thought could read. The second approach was to ask which they liked better, reading or writing. The final approach was to question students as they were actually engaged in reading and writing activities.

When asked which children in the classroom he thought were readers, Jamal sorted everyone in the class by reading groups. "The ones like me that know lots of words, we're in the blue group. Kids in the green group know some words, but the kids in the red group don't know none. The teacher's always helping them."

Alex responded very quickly to that same question, "Hardly nobody. I'm the only one. Well, maybe Jamal too. He knows his letters." When questioned on whether knowing the

alphabet letters meant someone could read, he quickly nodded his head in agreement. "That and he (Jamal) writes real neat."

When Antonio was questioned on who he thought could read, he immediately named Jamal. I asked how he knew that Jamal could read and he listed Jamal's capabilities. "He knows all of his letters. And he can read good. He always know the answers to the teacher's questions." When questioned further on whether anyone else in the class could read, he seemed less sure of his answer. "I think lots of people do. But just the ones who get the answers right at the letter games."

Tiarra was asked if all the students in class could read. "No. Just people who can look at a word and just say it." None of the students from the red group gave me a verbal answer on who could read or write.

More ideas on what actually counts as reading and writing in the students' eyes were discovered when they were questioned on which of the activities they preferred. Most of the children agreed that writing was much more fun than reading. Alyssa said, "I like to write better. Cutting out and coloring is more fun than reading." When questioned on what cutting out and coloring had to do with writing, she looked at me a little strangely. "Cause, silly. That's what

we do at the writing table."

Other students shared Alyssa's view that writing was much more fun than reading. Antonio agreed with Alyssa's opinion. "Writing's more fun cause you get to draw pictures."

Alex also felt that writing was fun adding, "But I don't spell too good." When questioned if spelling was a part of writing he said, "Sometimes. Only when she (Ms. Paige) makes us write words on our pictures at the writing table."

I then became curious and questioned the students concerning what occurred at the reading table. Alyssa wrinkled her face up as if she smelled something bad and said, "Writing to Read workbooks." When asked if she liked to do those, she all but yelled the word, "No!" Many of the students voiced this same negative view.

Aside from the work tables, there were many materials in the classroom that provided opportunities for discussing reading and writing with the students as they engaged in literacy activities. Tiarra was holding a pointer in her hand reading down a chart of class names. I explained to her that she was reading, yet had previously claimed that she didn't know how to read. When questioned on how she knew all of the names if she couldn't read she replied, "I just can.

It's not reading when somebody tells you. And Ms. Paige reads these everyday to us, so I know em."

Ms. Paige also encouraged daily reading by rotating new books into her reading corner. While Alex was looking at books one day, I asked if he knew how to read. "I'm knowing stuff," he replied. When asked to explain he responded, "You know, letters. I'm smart." I then questioned him on how knowing his letters made him smart. "We all gotta know them. They lets you read." Since he knew his letters, I again asked if he could read. "Only some words, but I'll know more when I'm bigger. You learn to read more every year and when you're big you can read everything."

The parents' views on what it meant to learn to read and write focused upon activities that did not count as reading. When asked if her daughter was learning to read at school, Ms. Jones replied, "Well, she learning her letters, and I hope she's reading some by the end of the year, but it's only kindergarten." When questioned if her daughter ever did any writing at home she replied, "She tries. Sometimes she'll write something real like cat or dog, but mostly just a bunch of letters."

This view that the children were not able to read or write was also voiced by Ms. Jackson when discussing the little books that her son brought home. "He can't really

read them, though. He mostly just knows the stories."

Mrs. Williams voiced an opinion similar to Ms. Jackson's. "Sure this program (Waterford) teaches letters and sounds and gives them books to memorize, but that doesn't mean that it teaches them to read." These opinions demonstrated the parents' views on the types of activities that did not count as reading and writing.

Mrs. Hart was the only parent that voiced what she felt counted as reading and writing. When asked if her child could read she responded:

> Oh, yes. He tries to sound letters out as he pronounces them, and some words he just knows. He tries to write words and letters and stuff. It's really hard to say because he does so much. He does a lot of writing. He tries to write words like cat and dog. His name, first, middle and last. All kinds of words. He's real smart.

Mrs. Hart believed that her son was truly reading and writing.

The students and parents provided both examples and non-examples of what they viewed as reading and writing. The next section explores the question of why children learn to read and write. This segment presents the participants' views on student motivation for engagement in literacy

activities.

Why Do Children Learn to Read and Write?

The students' responses to this question appeared to fall into two categories: school reasons and personal reasons. The school reasons centered around advancing to higher grade levels and being able to learn more difficult concepts.

When Antonio was questioned on why he wanted to learn his alphabet, his only response was so that he could say them. I asked if he could say them now and he quickly sang the *ABC song*. When questioned as to why he continued to learn his alphabet if he could already say all of the letters, he replied, "Well to read and stuff, ya know." I then asked if he had to know all of his letters before he could learn to read he laughed and replied, "Of course. Everyone knows that."

Alyssa was very sure of why she wanted to learn to read. "I want to read books cause then you can go to first grade." This view that children have to learn to read to be promoted was voiced by six other students: three from the red group, two from the green group and one from the blue.

Jeffery wanted to learn to read so that he could be promoted, however he wasn't sure which grade he would be promoted to. "I wanna be in the last grade," Jeffery said.

When questioned on whether he had to be able to read to do this, he responded, "You gotta learn to read so you can grow up." When asked if all grown-ups can read he replied, "That's silly. You can read and you're grown-up." This desire to read so they could grow up surfaced with several other students: three in the red group and one from the green group.

Aside from their desire to grow up, other personal reasons for learning to read and write ranged from getting good jobs in the future to pleasing both adults and God. Alyssa brought the issue of future careers into the discussion one day at the puzzle center. I questioned the group on why they wanted to learn to read. "To get jobs," Alyssa said. "You gotta read to do that."

Antonio agreed and added that he was going to be a police man. "I'm gonna be a policeman like Daddy. Him wear police clothes and have a badge, but he don't shoot nobody."

Alyssa stated that she was going to be a teacher. I pointed out that she was going to teach a lot of people how to read as a teacher. "Yea," she replied. "But then it'll be easy cause I'll be big."

When questioned on why he wanted to learn to read, Alex reminded me that he already knew how. I then changed my question to why he liked to read. "Cause then I learn stuff

like in that book about the hopper grass. It has good pictures, too."

Tiarra wanted to learn to write to please her mother. When questioned on why she was working so hard on her writing paper she replied, "Cause my momma hangs up stuff that we write." I asked if she worked hard to make her mother happy, and she smiled and nodded yes. "This will look good on the 'fridgerator."

A little boy from the green group stated that he had to learn to read so that he could read the Bible. "That's why I gotta learn to read. So I can read it (the Bible) and make God happy. And then I'll be real smart." This appeared to be a strong motivation for this child.

While Jamal was working on a Valentine card at the writing table, he pointed to the words on his card and read, "I love you." When asked how he knew what that card said, he replied, "It's on a card I have at home. It's from my Daddy. He don't live here, but he send me a card for my birthday." I asked if his mother had helped him read it. "She read it to me once. But I remembered after that." This personal message had stayed with him enough to recognize the words in a different context.

Alex said that he could spell 'I Love You' and many other words. "I can spell lots of words. I can even spell

Jaguars," he boasted. When asked how he learned to spell such a big word he replied, "Cause I love them. So I can read it." Personal feelings appeared to provide the students with motivation to read and write.

The only parent motivation for teaching their children to read and write that surfaced during the interviews was the concern for future career success. Mrs. Thomas expressed this while discussing her husband.

> He works construction. He works hard so he's tired at night. I like to have all the kids work done so we don't bother him. But he's nice to them about it. I think he helps because he hopes they will get easier jobs when they grow up.

The teachers all three focused upon school-related motivators when asked what encouraged their students to read. Ms. Paige mentioned her Excellent Work board where she hung papers receiving a 'E', and her scoop on reading board where students kept track of the number of books they had read by adding scoops to an ice cream cone with their name upon it. The other kindergarten teachers also mentioned stickers and Happy Grams as tokens that motivated their students. None of these school based motivators were mentioned by the any of the student or parent participants.

Whether children learn for personal or school related

reasons, it was clear that many factors unrelated to the classroom were serving to motivate literacy acquisition for Ms. Paige's students. The next section explores the ways in which students, parents and teachers perceived that students learned to read and write.

How Do Children Learn to Read and Write?

Because Ms. Paige's views on how children learn to read and write provided the basis for the organization of materials and routines in the classroom, her views relating to emergent literacy impacted the remaining participants in the study. When questioned as to how she believed students develop as literate individuals, she appeared certain of her beliefs.

> Well, with kindergarten children I first think they need a lot of work recognizing letters and sounds. They also need to be read to constantly. We start each morning with books and songs. We go over the alphabet cards and match them to our picture envelopes. I do this daily so that they work on letter recognition and sounds. I also use the Writing to Read program, which is a phonics based program that helps them with letter recognition, sounds and writing the letters. And now I have started Direct Instruction, which you saw was

very based in phonics and letter-sound recognition. Plus I still have a writing table where they work in journals and the reading table where they do Writing to Read workbooks. So I think that they learn to read and write by getting a lot of practice with letters, sounds and writing. I try to keep a well-rounded program to meet the individual needs of my students.

These beliefs provided the foundation for the activities in which Ms. Paige's students were participating daily.

The students' answers to the question of how they learned to read and write were much more simplistic and to the point. Alyssa believed that, "You gotta know all your letters, then you just start reading."

Jeffery was playing an alphabet game on the computer and getting many of them right. When questioned on whether this meant he could read or just that he knew his alphabet letters, he replied, "I know how to read. But ain't nobody teach me that. I just know." I then asked how he learned to read. "Cause I grew up and knew. Everybody reads that grows up." As he appeared to be in a talkative mood, I continued to push the point asking if he needed to know all of his letters before he could read. "Yea, you gotta know them. But I already do so I can read." According to Ms. Paige, Jeffery

knew few alphabet letters.

Antonio gave Jamal credit for teaching him to read. When asked how Jamal taught him he elaborated, "You know, just showing them to me and helping me with my work. Like journals, he tells me what to write." When asked how being told helps, Antonio responded, "Then you know next time."

Tiarra mentioned in conversation that she had taught her little sister her alphabet while they were playing school. When questioned on how she was planning to teach her to read, she replied, "Read to her. Then she'll know lots of stories. I'll let her look at my books. And videos, too. Then she'll know songs and letters. Then she can read."

Aside from these very general findings, student responses to the question of how children learn to read and write are divided into six sub-topics: the use of direct, explicit instruction, manipulatives in the classroom, writing as a teaching tool, nursery rhymes, the Waterford videos, and reading to children. Each of these topics is discussed in this section.

Direct, Explicit Instruction

The students described many ways that Ms. Paige used direct, explicit instruction to teach the class to read and write. Alex explained, "She goes over letters and words every morning. And she makes us do the computer."

Jamal added that Ms. Paige taught them words using little books. When asked how the words taught him to read, he said, "Cause you hear them and you see them, so you learn them. And we get to take the books home, so we see 'em there, too."

Tiarra was busy reading names off of a class list when asked why the names were listed there. She explained that Ms. Paige placed charts around the room and went over them every day so the students would learn to read them. This list of names was just one example. Other items which Tiarra identified as being displayed to help students learn to read were the numbers and letters and the days of the week bear. She stated that Ms. Paige went over those every day.

Antonio was reading a chart of words which I had observed Ms. Paige going over earlier that morning. Antonio read the list, then explained that Ms. Paige had taught him all of those words. When asked how he said, "She tells me to sound it out. So I say the first letter sound and then I can guess the word."

Another child from the green group was listening to our exchange and added, "She says the sounds too. So we know the letters that they begin with."

When the red group was questioned on how Ms. Paige was helping them learn to read and write, the answers were a

little more vague. Jeffery responded, "She just tells us and we learn." I questioned him specifically on the ABC picture card game that they played each morning and asked how that game helped him learn to read. "We gotta know them before we can read. She always shows us those."

When asked how Ms. Paige was teaching the letters of the alphabet, many students referred to direct, explicit instruction techniques. Alex knew that Ms. Paige was focusing upon one letter each week. When asked how she was teaching letters he replied, "Ms. Paige teaches them to us. We do one each week. She say them every morning, and makes us write them and stuff."

Antonio gave Ms. Paige credit for teaching him his letters. "She shows you and you say it, and write it. Then you learn it. And when you learn it, you always know it." Jeffery also credited Ms. Paige for his learning the alphabet. When he was identifying letters on the computer screen, I questioned how he learned them. "Ms. Paige show them to me and make me say them."

Alyssa also gave Ms. Paige credit for teaching her the letters. "I learn them here with Ms. Paige. She goes over them every day." Alyssa explained how she learned her letters by saying and writing them. "Ms. Paige says them all the time. And I write them." When asked again how she

learned them, she responded, "We sing them, and write them. Now I know them, but only some." Though unable to verbalize exactly how direct, explicit instruction was teaching them to read, the students appeared to feel that this daily instruction on the letters and sounds was helping them.

Many of the ways that students felt they were learning to read and write happened at work tables in the classroom. Jamal explained, "We do lots of stuff here. We write in journals, workbooks, and read stories."

Antonio was working in his Writing to Read workbook and telling me the sounds in the word *jump*. When I asked how he learned all of those sounds, he explained, "The computer keep saying them over and over. Then I say them and clap and stomp. Then you just know them." I questioned why he had to write them now if he had already learned them on the computer. "So I don't forget. Writing makes you remember."

Another child from the blue group agreed that writing was a key to how they were all learning to read and write. "We write a lot. But she reads us stuff and makes us say it over and over. We learn that way, by saying and writing it." This view that repeatedly saying and writing the letters was how they were learning to read was voiced by many students.

Manipulatives in the Classroom

The classroom contained an abundance of manipulative

letters and reading materials, which students felt were helping them learn to read and write. Jamal was playing a letter game where he matched pictures to cards with words. When asked how he knew what the words were, he responded,

> I just know them. I say the pictures and look for what it starts with. I'm knowing my sounds. Plus some are easy and I do them first. Like cat. It's gotta start with c and end with t, so that's the only word it could be.

He explained this while pointing to the card with the word cat printed on it.

When asked what items in the classroom helped him in learning to read and write Alex responded, "All this. Everything in here helps us. We got books, puzzles, games and computers. And we get to play with it all!"

Antonio was working on an activity matching pictures to the first letter in the words. When asked if this activity was helping him learn his letters and sounds, he replied, "Yea, and we play lots of good games." I then questioned him on which other items in the classroom helped him learn to read and write. "She got all of this," he said as he waved his arms around to indicate the entire classroom. "All the games and puzzles, books and computers. Yea, we're getting really smart."

Tiarra was playing with the pictures and letter envelopes which Ms. Paige used each morning to review letters and sounds. When asked if that was helping her learn to read, she responded, "Yea. I learn stuff like *c*-clown, and *b*-bear. Then we know words for each letter." When asked about other ways that Ms. Paige taught letters, Tiarra replied, "This game has letters behind the pictures, you guess and then check. We also got a bucket of letters to spill out and play with." When questioned on how these games teach her to read, she said, "They teach me letters. And letters come first before reading." Neither of the students from the red group gave any verbal responses on how classroom materials helped them learn to read and write. When parents were questioned on this same topic, none identified the manipulatives in the classroom as helping the students learn to read or write.

The three parent volunteers did appear to be more tolerant of the classroom manipulatives than did the other parents. Mrs. Williams felt that the students played a lot, but, "They seem to be learning so I guess they don't play too much." Mrs. Thomas also commented on the amount of games in the classroom but felt that, "The teacher knows what's best. And after all, kids should have some time to play. They're just kids."

Ms. Jones admitted that she was a little concerned at all of the toys at first. "When I first brought her here I thought that all they were gonna do was play. Then I saw the work she brought home and I didn't worry about that anymore." Ms. Jackson also said that they had too many play things in the classroom. "It probably distracts the kids from learning."

Parents identified only computers as an item in the classroom that was helping students learn. Each of the parents interviewed stated that the computers were helping the children learn. Their opinions are discussed in detail in theme four. The next section examines students' perceptions of writing as a teaching tool.

Writing as a Teaching Tool

Many of the students appeared to view writing as the main way they were learning to read. When Antonio was working on the letter *O* on his computer, I asked him what the octopus was doing. "He's swimming around the *O*, showing us how to make one." When I asked one what, he laughed. "One *O*. You make it like he swims." Catching on to this concept, I asked why the computer was teaching him that. "Cause it's writin'. Everybody's got to know how to do that."

Later, as Antonio was working at the writing table, I questioned him on how he learned to write. "I know cause I'm

smart. He (his dad) told me to write stuff. He wants to learn me to be smart." When asked how his father taught him to write, Antonio replied, "He just say it and then I write it."

Tiarra was working on the letter *V* on her computer when I questioned who taught her that letter. "My cousin. She's nine and knows letters and stuff." When asked how her cousin taught her, she explained, "She just told me. And she wrote them too, and I copied." When asked if that was how she learned all of her letters she replied, "Yea. By writin' them."

Jeffery told me that he knew all of his letters, though his teacher claimed he knew very few. When asked how he learned them, he replied, "I write them at home."

Alyssa also believed that she was learning her letters by writing them. "My grandma's teaching me my letters. She say them to me, and then I say them to her. Then I write them. If you want to learn you letters, you gotta write them." When asked who told her that, she said, "My grandma. She says that how you learn."

Another student from the red group agreed that writing was how he learned. I was helping him sound out words to write on his picture, and I had to write a couple of letters for him to copy. When asked how I could teach him his

letters, he replied, "Write them for me. Like you just did." When asked if copying the letters helped him to learn them, the child responded, "Yea. That's how you learn them."

This belief that writing was how they learned to read was voiced by many students. The next section explores teacher, parent and student views on the importance of learning nursery rhymes.

Nursery Rhymes

Ms. Paige talked of the importance of teaching nursery rhymes to children during our interview sessions. "At the beginning of the year I made charts and planned some cute activities around the rhymes. Now I will go over them occasionally. Usually during record time."

Ms. Hamilton supported the importance of using nursery rhymes with children. "A lot of kids point to words while reading. The charts teach them that. They love those charts 'cause they can read them all. That is twenty-six poetry charts that they can read."

The students appeared to enjoy the nursery rhyme charts. When questioned about them, Jamal explained, "I just like them. They teach me words and letters. That's what make you smart." When asked if he had to know his rhymes before he could read, he replied, "The rhymes teach you letters and words. You gotta know them before you read, and all smart

people can read."

Tiarra also felt that the nursery rhymes were something that she should learn. "I did Wee Willie Winkie today." When questioned as to why she needed to learn this story, she explained, "So I can say it. Everybody knows that story. Even my mom."

One parent agreed with this view that nursery rhymes were an important part of the students' education. Ms. Coleman shared, "If they sit down and watch the tapes (Waterford videos) once or twice a week, they can memorize those songs and poems. It's stuff like Humpty Dumpty that everyone should know. Then they can say them by themselves."

Though few students identified nursery rhymes as helping them to learn to read or write, all of them responded that they enjoyed learning them. Only a few parents expressed any views relating to nursery rhymes, while all three teachers considered these to be one of the greatest strengths of the Waterford Program. The videos provided by this program for each of the students to keep assured teachers that most of the students were being exposed to nursery rhymes at home. These videos are discussed in the following section.

Waterford Videos

Many students felt the videos provided by the Waterford

program were helping them learn to read. Some looked upon them as homework, others considered them a fun way to practice their letters and sounds.

When asked if the videos were helping him learn to read, Alex claimed that they were teaching him all kinds of things. "I know the letters, words, and even songs. I got to learn them. It's homework."

Jamal stated that the videos had helped him to learn his letters. "I been knowin' them. But now I know them better. Cause you say them and sing them, and that makes you learn them. Them videos is fun."

Tiarra said that her little sister was learning her letters from the videos. "She's knowing some of her letters, and she's only three. The videos are really good. We watch them all the time."

Jeffery was one student who appeared to see no educational value in the videos. When asked if they were helping him learn his alphabet, he responded, "No. I don't know them yet. But they're fun to watch. I watch them all the time. And I know all them songs and stories. My Grandma watches them with me." Two other students from the red group did not recognize the videos when I showed them the cases. The rest of the children made positive comments concerning them.

The parents also had positive reactions to the videos provided by the Waterford program. Ms. Coleman said,

> They're real good. Now I'll watch them myself. I have a few neighborhood kids who come over and watch the tapes with me. Some of them don't even go to school yet, but by the time they do they will know. It's like an ongoing thing that I can help them be ready for school.

Ms. Hart agreed that the videos were helping the children, and stated that the tapes were among the only shows that she would allow her son to watch. "But we don't watch a lot of T.V. Those are pretty good though and I will let him watch those, cause they're helping him read."

Ms. Jones was uncertain how the tapes were helping her daughter, but did allow her to watch them. She confided, "I let her watch those a lot. She knows them by heart so I don't know why she keeps watching them. But she says that her teacher tells her to."

All three teachers were very impressed with the videos. Ms. Paige believed that their strength was in putting the information to music.

> I think that they are really good. And we encourage parents to play those as often as they can. Some of them even say that they are sick of the songs. But

they do. They really help. And the kids learn so much easier through music rather than a dry presentation of a skill.

Ms Hamilton agreed that the tapes were helping students to learn to read. "Another thing that I have seen this year is the power of the video tapes. I noticed that those children having difficulty learning their letters and sounds picked them up very quickly once they got those videos."

Mrs. Sanders used them as homework to improve her students' reading skills.

I tell the parents that this is homework and that the children should watch them everyday until they know all of their letters and sounds. I tell them to watch it until they can't stand it anymore, and then leave the room and let their kid watch it ten more times.

Though the teachers all agreed that the videos were very good for the students, they were not quick to attribute the students' gains in literacy to the videos.

Ms. Paige explained that with so many literacy activities occurring in the classroom, it was difficult to identify which activity produced reading gains.

That's hard to say. But I know they help. I had a little boy that came to me and I told momma that I

didn't think that he was going to be ready to go to first grade. He was very young, didn't know any letters and was easily distracted. She parked him and his three younger siblings in front of the TV and they watched the tapes everyday. He knew half of his letters by the first nine weeks and all of them by the second. And according to her, so do the babies -- they are actually toddlers and now I feel that they are more prepared for school thanks to the videos.

Mrs. Sanders also believed that the videos prepared the students to come to school by connecting home and school experiences:

> My youngest child was three when we got the tapes and I took them home and showed them to her regularly. Within two weeks, if I said *P* she would say, "pig" because she had seen the visual with auditory. She knows all of her letters and sounds and she's only four. So now the kids are getting it at home as well as here at school.

Though reasons as to how the Waterford videos were helping changed from participant to participant, students, parents and teachers all seemed to agree that the videos were helping the students to acquire literacy skills. The

next section focuses upon the importance of reading to children.

Reading to Children

Ms. Paige believed that reading to children and providing them opportunities to read independently were both crucial components of her literacy program.

> I read to them at morning carpet time, right before lunch, after lunch, and right before we go home. I fit it in as many times a day as possible. They can read any time they are at centers. I have a book corner in the back, a few big books that we've made and the Waterford books.

Many of the students shared that they were learning to read through Ms. Paige reading to them. When Alex was asked how he was learning to read, he stated that the teacher read to him all the time. When questioned on how this taught him to read, he explained, "You can sometimes say it after she does. And then you know what the stories say."

Tiarra agreed that she was learning to read by having Ms. Paige read to her. While Tiarra was reading the book The Space Ark, I asked how she learned to read the book. She replied, "My teacher read it to me, and then we read it at the same time. Now I just know it."

Alyssa had a new baby sister at home. When questioned

on how she would teach her little sister to read, she replied, "I'll read to her all the time." When probed as to how this would help her little sister learn to read, Alyssa said, "Ms. Paige reads to us all the time, and we're learning. So that's how I'll teacher her."

Jamal recognized the importance of the independent reading time that Ms. Paige provided for her students. He stated that having books to read was helping him read more fluently. "We got all those little books. And when you read them, you keep gettin' better."

Mrs. Williams was sad that more parents did not understand the importance of reading with their children. She had recently joined a book club to create a library at home for her granddaughter.

> I joined a book of the month club and I had to pay to join it, but I want her to learn as good as everyone so I joined the club and each month we get a book. I read it to her over and over, and then I ask her to read it to me. We read it over and over, and she really is learning to read. In kindergarten -- I'm dumbfounded.

When asked if she read a lot with her own kids, she looked regretful. "No. I read the Bible to them. But with them I taught their letters. Now I know to read and I'm doing it

with my grand-babies."

Whether through direct, explicit instruction or the use of manipulatives, writing, nursery rhymes, videos or children's literature, the one thing apparent in Ms. Paige's classroom was that a variety of learning situations were created in an attempt to meet the individual needs of the students. One way that Ms. Paige provided this individualized instruction was through the use of computers, which is discussed in detail in the next section.

The Use of Computers for Literacy Instruction

Most of the participants were very positive concerning the use of computers for literacy instruction. Students, parents and teachers all seemed to agree that technology was an important component in this classroom. Participants had differing views about how computers were helping the children. Student opinions on ways in which the computers were helping them learn to read and write focused upon the sharing of stories, teaching letters and sounds, and providing practice with writing.

Student Views

Reading stories to the students was one of the many ways that the children thought the computers were helping them to read. Jamal listed stories as the main way computers were helping him. When pushed for further

details, he explained, "They tell you words that are big and you might not know them. But after the story you do. And they be funny. Mine was a rap and the pig was silly."

Alex explained how the stories on the Waterford program were helping him to learn high frequency words.

> It's got a bunch of stories and you got to listen and click on words so you know them. And you get to click on pictures to see if you know what the story be about. You also gotta click on pictures that begin with letters. Like if it was *L* you click on lion.

To encourage Alex to reconfirm all that the computer was teaching him, I asked if it was mostly teaching him letters. "Sounds and letters and even writing. And lots of stories." Ten other children listed stories as the way the computers were helping them learn to read: Four were from the green group, four from the blue group and two from the red group.

Many students identified letter recognition and practice with sounds as the main strengths of the computers. Antonio shared that 'doing' his ABC's was his favorite thing to do on the computer. He especially enjoyed singing them. After sharing this piece of information, I was treated to a rather loud version of the *ABC Song*.

Tiarra also shared that she did a lot with letters at the Waterford station. "You sing them, trace them, click on them. You just learn them."

Alex explained that he learned his sounds while reading stories on the computers. "It told me the story and I look at them words while it's reading, and I know piggy starts with *P.*" When asked how he knew it wasn't another word like little that started with *P* he replied, "Cause when it said piggy, a *P* word was lit up. That's how you learn the sounds."

A final way that many children felt the computers were assisting them was through practice with writing. While Tiarra was working at the Waterford station, I questioned why she was tracing the *V* with her finger. "So I know how to make it. I drawed it with my hand. I wrote it with a pencil. And now I know how to make it."

Frequently the students were unable to explain the purpose of the activities on the computers. Tiarra was playing a game where she clicked on all of the *V*'s. When asked why she replied, "It makes a picture if you get them right. Look a heart." I explained to her that it was a valentine, and asked what letter valentine began with. Tiarra thought and then looked surprised as she told me it began with *V*. It was obvious that she had not made that

connection, because she was calling the valentine a heart.

Some students did not see any connection between the computers and learning to read. Alyssa was working at a Waterford computer when asked if it was teaching her how to read. "Not to read," she replied. "Just letters." When questioned further about whether the letters helped her learn to read, she looked frustrated. "I'm just doing letters, not reading."

Jeffery was not very verbal concerning ways in which the computers were helping him learn to read. When asked what he was learning on them he replied, "My ABC's." A shrug was his only response to how the computer was helping him to learn the alphabet. He later confided, "They (computers) make me smarter."

Another student from the red group was playing a letter game. When asked to explain what he was learning from this game, he frowned and replied, "It's just a game. It's not teaching me nothing."

Almost all of the students asserted that they enjoyed working on the computers. Antonio elaborated, "I like computers 'cause I be playing on them a long time doing stuff." When asked what he was learning on the computers he replied, "You learn stuff like T and turtle and V and valentine, like *U* and umbrella and a lot of fun stuff."

Jeffery also enjoyed the computers. When asked why, he replied, "I do lots of stories and they funny. I wish I could be on them all the time." Only one of the students interviewed reported not liking the computers. This was a little girl in the red group who claimed the headphones hurt her ears. She had pierced ears and stated that the headphones pushed the earrings into her head.

Parent Views

Ms. Coleman thought the computers had helped the students to focus.

> I think the kids using the computers do a whole lot more better work than the kids in my other boy's class. These kids do good work and being on the computers have helped them a lot. I knew a child here last year when they got the program and until then it was very hard for the kid to learn his letters and sounds. Once he got on the program he started getting it. And by the end of the year he was ready to go on to first grade.

Many of the parents appeared to recognize that the computers were helping the students in a variety of ways. Mrs. Williams commented on all that the computers were teaching. "It's helping them learn letters and sounds, and words. They even doing some reading on it."

Mrs. Thomas liked the Writing to Read computers. She had a special attachment to this program, thanks to a training session provided by the school.

> They not only learn to recognize the letter, but the sound and how to write it. I got to go to a little workshop on how to help kids with this program. They did it for parent volunteers. I really like that program 'cause it's helping with both reading and writing. Even here in kindergarten.

The three parents that were not classroom volunteers had less knowledge concerning the computers, but still appeared pleased that they were a part of their child's learning experiences. Ms. Hart stated,

> I think that the program is very educating and he has benefitted a lot from it. I'm really pleased that his classroom has this. And since he likes it, he enjoys coming to school. And I think that is very important.

Ms. Jones was also pleased that the Waterford program was a part of her daughter's class. "It's so colorful and cute and everything looks like a game. But it's letters so it's educational. My daughter talks about it all the time. She always trying to tell me about games and things that she play on there, but I don't know much about it." Five of the

six parents interviewed said that their child talked at home about what they did on the computer that day in school.

A common theme among parents was that view that the computers made their children enjoy attending school. Ms. Jackson stated, "They're what he talk most about. He likes the teacher too, but I think he likes playing on the computers best." This view was shared by many parents.

Ms. Hart was one of two parents that mentioned having a computer at home. She stated that her son played games that taught him, "Spelling, numbers and things like that."

Mrs. Williams also mentioned having a computer at home, and how well her oldest granddaughter can utilize the Internet. "The day is gonna come that if a person don't know computers, they're gonna be lost in this world". All of the parents appeared pleased with the technology component in the classroom.

Teacher Views

Ms. Paige was very optimistic concerning parents' understanding of the Waterford program.

> They like to come in and just watch it. Some of them drop their child off and don't want to go home. They want to stay and watch the computers because they think it is so neat. It's something different than they had, and I think they really

do like it.

She explained that she went over the program with the parents at a meeting and felt that they had good insight as to what their children were doing on the computers. She was, however, very disappointed at the number of parents that came to the meeting.

> I'm sad to say that only two from my room showed up. But I explained to them the whole procedure of how it works. The books, and tapes and how parents can work with them at home to reinforce all of this. The parents that are willing to come in get it. Otherwise, it is just up to the kids at home.

Ms. Paige believed that the computers were teaching skills that would not normally be introduced in kindergarten. "It does a lot of rhyming and blending. And a lot of word families - and families that I wouldn't think to do. Like the itch family."

Ms. Paige felt that the computers were assisting the students in developing independence.

> Well, they are developing the independence to go over and work for twenty minutes by themselves without the help of a teacher or classmates. This carries over to other centers. They are just more independent.

Ms. Hamilton felt that the computers also helped to

control behavior problems while reaching students that typical instruction was not reaching.

> I had a little boy last year who could not sit still. He couldn't listen to stories or pay attention to flash cards and his work was terrible. The only time that I could get him to sit still was on the computer with headphones on. I increased his time and put him on twice a day. It was the only way he learned.

Ms. Paige shared this feeling that computers were beneficial in avoiding behavior problems.

> That may be one of the biggest strengths of the computers. It is the only time that many of them get quiet and listen. Just by keeping their attention, they are probably learning a lot. Plus it is so nice not to have to fuss at some of them for that twenty minutes. My room would be a lot quieter if I had about ten more computers.

Despite the positive attitudes towards the computers, Ms. Paige was quick to deny that this program could ever take the place of a good teacher.

> Oh, no! I don't think that the computers are teaching my children anything. I think that they are reinforcing the skills that I've taught in class, and that they are helping them to drill and practice

those skills. But if I wasn't teaching my children, they wouldn't learn from the computer. The computer doesn't set up shared reading, guided reading, journal writing. You know - all of the components of a literacy program that we were trained in by Wright Group. I just think that this program compliments my instruction nicely. But it could never take the place of it.

Though all participants agreed that the computers were beneficial to the students, there was wide disparity in exactly how they were helping.

Working with Children at Home

Another theme which aroused differing views from the participants was working with children at home. When questioned on how children learned to read and write at home, the materials used and who was providing the instruction, the interview responses ranged from discussing the materials used to the instructional methods employed. These responses are grouped into three categories: student views of learning at home, parent perceptions and reading in the home.

Student Views

The student's opinions of how they learned at home focused upon tangible aspects of learning. Alex stated that

his mother had papers at home for him to do. "Her got a lot of papers and I do them every night." When asked if his mother helped him with the papers, he responded, "No, I go to my room and do them while she's cookin'."

Jamal shared that his mother also got him a workbook to do at home. "She bought me a school book at Wal-mart. Now I can be smarter by knowing all that. It gots lots of things for me to write." When asked if his mother checked his answers, he replied, "Yea, and tells me what I done wrong so's I can fix it." Jamal also shared that his mother used alphabet flash cards at home to teach him letters and sounds. "We got these letters on cards and she (his mother) says them. And sometimes she writes words and makes me say them. And she always tells me to sounds words out. She always say that."

Tiarra sang the *ABC* song and stated that her mother taught her that at home. When asked what else her mother taught her at home, Tiarra just shrugged. When pushed a little further and questioned if she wrote at home, Tiarra shook her head yes. Tiarra confided that her mother had her write letters frequently. "I write them and say them and say the sounds."

Antonio shared that his father taught him his letters through games. "When I say a word I can hear how to spell

it. My daddy showed me when I was little. We play games like that all the time." When asked why he called it a game, Antonio explained, "He says words and the game is to see if I can get it. I win if I'm right." When asked if he won a lot, he replied, "Yea -- I'm real smart."

Antonio was one of only a few students in the class that discussed relatives outside of the immediate family as helping them with school work. "My uncle teach me. He says words and sound them out. I can spell cat - C A T . He always teaching me stuff." When asked if his uncle used pictures or papers to teach Antonio he replied, "No. He just points at stuff. He say, 'That's a dog. D - o - g, dog.' Then I try to do it." Few other children brought relatives into the discussions.

Some of the students said that they didn't do any work at home. Alyssa said, "I play at home. I got a new baby sister, so mom is busy taking care of her."

Gregory confirmed that he didn't do any work at home either. "I like to play at home. I work all day at school."

Alex was the only student who stated that his mother asked him about the things they were learning in school. "She asks me about school all the time. She wants me to learn to read good so I can be smart like her."

Some of the children credited their older siblings for

helping them with their school work at home. When asked who he read with at home, Alex named his older brother. "He's seven and knows everything." Alex also stated that his brother helped him learn to spell. "He says words and spells them out. Then I can write them." Alex also said that he helped his older brother with his homework. "And I does his work too. When he brings home homework I do some with him. He in the first grade and know lots of things." When asked if his mother helped them with the homework, he responded, "If we can't get it she do. Mostly we get it. My big brother's real smart." Five other students in the class identified siblings as helping them with school work.

Parent Views

Parents are a child's first teacher, so their views concerning emergent literacy determine the ways in which they prepare their children for school. The parents' perceptions shared during the interview sessions identified strategies used to assist their children in becoming successful in school. The parents who volunteered in Ms. Paige's classroom described their attempts at copying her methods of instruction in their homes.

Mrs. Thomas explained,

I learn a lot from watching the teacher in the mornings and I find myself asking her(daughter)the

same types of questions when we're at home. You know like, "This word begins like cat. What letter does cat begin with?" And I also have her repeat a lot after me just like she (Ms. Paige) does. You know, she's been a teacher a long time so I guess she knows good stuff to ask. And then it's just like she is at school. I want to help her do real good.

One parent gave credit to her late husband for teaching her children at home. Ms. Coleman explained that her husband taught their son his letters.

He just sat down with him all the time and would show them to him and go over them. And he had him write them. He would do about three letters at a time and would teach the sounds, too. He did it in the evenings, in the car, walking. Just everywhere. When he learned those three he'd do three more. And boy was he patient. I couldn't have gone over the same three letters like that. But he could and that's how my boy got it. He did it all the time. And he taught him a lot more than just letters. This one knew his address and phone number when he was three. Now I just help him practice whatever he learns in class. That keeps him thinking about

school even at home.

Though not a classroom volunteer, Ms. Jackson had recently been to conference with Ms. Paige and was attempting to following her advice for helping her son at home. "He always trying to sound out letters in words - you know, like on signs and stuff. It's like he's trying to read everything. It's hard for me to sound stuff out - I just want to tell him the words. But the teacher say it's better to let him do it his-self." When asked about writing she said, "He don't like writing as much as he does reading. But sometimes he'll put a bunch of letters down on paper and tell me what it says. I can't understand it, but I smile and tell him I like it. Ms. Paige says that's important. I just want him to learn good in school."

Some of the parents expressed that their methods of helping their children at home come from the methods that were used on them when they were children. Ms. Hart was telling of the things she did to help her son at home. "I read to him a lot. He loves books. And I try to teach him his letters and numbers and things like that." When asked how she taught him his letters. she replied, "By showing them to him and having him write them down. That's how I was taught. And now he knows them good."

Ms. Jones also used the methods with her daughter that

she herself learned from as a child. "I show her letters and make her say them. That's how I learned my letters and now she's learning them."

A frequently expressed hindrance to working with their children at home was lack of time. Ms. Jones expressed this concern. "I look at her work and let her tell me about it. And we go over her letters on her work. But I stay pretty busy with her and my baby. But she's a smart girl. When I tell her to write her letters she does a pretty good job."

Teaching handwriting seemed to be a major concern of the parents. Ms. Jackson shared, "I'm always telling him to write down letters and trying to get him to make them right. He ain't too neat. But we working on it." Five of the six parents interviewed identified handwriting practice as one of the ways in which they helped their child at home.

The parent's views on ways to work with the students at home seemed to focus upon direct methods of instruction. Seeing the letters, then saying them, and finally writing them down appeared to be the most common methods employed by the parents. Few mentioned games, informal discussions or reading as ways in which they helped their children.

Reading in the Home

The students had different responses when questioned on whether or not they read at home. Antonio shared that he

read nightly at his house. "I read almost every night to my mom, so I read good. But sometimes she tells me to read by myself. Like if mom's reading the paper and dad's reading his books, I just have to read alone." When asked if his parents read a lot, he responded, "Yeah, they like reading." He went on to explain that he read the take home books to both of them, because that's his homework.

One reason some of the students didn't read at home was because they didn't have any books. This response was made by eight of the students. Alex was an exception claiming that he had many of his own books. "I got lots of books. My favorite is Green Eggs and Ham."

Jamal also stated that he had books at home. "I read Yogi Bear books at home. My daddy got them for me and read them to me once." When asked if he had other books at home, Jamal replied, "Yea, but I don't know their names. Yogi is my favorite." Few children mentioned having any other books at home besides the Waterford books.

Out of all of the students interviewed, Antonio was the only one who said he went to the library with his family. Jeffery shook his head no saying, "I don't even know where

the library is." Jeffery said that he did not read at home. When questioned as to why, he replied, "I like playing better." I then asked about the Waterford books. "I got them books. But I have to keep them put up. My cousin is just a baby and he'll tear them up so I keep them put away on a top shelf." When asked if he could reach them he said, "No, but grandmama can."

The books provided by the Waterford program for students to take home were a frequently discussed topic during the interviews. Most of the students believed that they could read these books, and many discussed sharing them with their families.

Alex saidd that his older brother read the books with him at home. "He reads my books to me all the time. But I can read them too. I don't even need nobody's help."

Jamal also talked of reading the Waterford books at home. "I read them with mommy."

When Antonio was asked about the Waterford books, he replied, "I read them books to my mommy. And my daddy." I asked if he read them more than once. "Yea. I keep them on my bookshelf." This was the only mention of a bookshelf by any of the students.

Tiarra liked the Waterford books. "I read my books to my momma, my sister and my grandma." When asked if she could

read them by herself, she replied, "I can only read sometimes. Cause sometime they be too hard. And I don't know all the words. But most of them that she (Ms. Paige) gives us is pretty easy."

Alyssa also stated that she read the Waterford books at home. "I like the puppy one best. Sometimes I can read them to momma after dinner. Mostly I just read them myself."

Jeffery said that he sometimes read the books at home, but didn't read them to anyone in his family. "I read to my ears. (Giggles) I like reading alone. I don't need no help." Because he had mentioned previously that he didn't like to read at home, I questioned when he read to himself. "When I run around the house while grandma's cooking, she yells and says, 'Go to your room.' Then I read them cause then I don't get yelled at." Jeffery's response about not reading the Waterford books at home was common. Only nine of the eighteen students interviewed said that they read the books at home. Many of these stated they read them alone.

The parents interviewed seemed very pleased with the Waterford books. Mrs. Thomas stated that her son loved the books. "We read them a lot, though I really think he only learns the stories and isn't really reading. But I guess that is a start."

Ms. Hart also described reading the books at home with

her son. She explained that he read them constantly, "to anyone who will listen. Mostly me. But also my mom. He loves them books -- reads them to you till you can't stand it no more. But then he goes and reads them to his toys." This view of the students reading the books over and over to a point of annoyance was a common dilemma expressed by the parents.

Ms. Paige seemed very positive about the children reading these books at home. "We hope they are not going in a closet somewhere. Besides they are really excited to get them."

Despite the positive parent responses, most of the students claimed that their parents didn't read at home. The most popular type of home reading seemed to be the Bible. When asked if her mother liked to read, Alyssa said, "She reads me my books a lot. And she read the Bible all the time". Five other students mentioned that their parents read the Bible and a few stated that their parents read it with them.

Mrs. Williams was not very hopeful about parents reading at home with their children.

> I doubt many of these kids is read to at home. So many of these young mothers are not really interested in their children. You might find maybe one or two.

> But the parents don't have the time. And most of them are single mothers.

An example of this lack of time was expressed by Ms. Jones. When asked if her daughter brought home little books to read to her, she responded,

> They get a lot of them. She know all the stories so there's no reason for me to bother reading them to her. I let her read them to me as soon as she brings them home. But she will try to read them to me over and over if I let her. I'm too busy for that. I keep telling her that I already heard that story and finally she quits. You know how kids like attention.

Despite the positive gains in school achievement when parents read with children at home, many of the students interviewed stated that this was not occurring. What was reported as occurring was structured instruction on recognition of the alphabet and practice with handwriting. Few participants mentioned poems, songs, or learning games, all of which are supported by research as assisting children in literacy acquisition (Adams, 1990; Cunningham, 1995; Yopp, 1992).

Chapter four has presented the participants' differing perspectives on emergent literacy. The narration began by stating the participants varied opinions on what counts as

reading and writing. After identifying participant views on these two concepts, the issue of motivation was presented in the second theme. Theme three portrayed participant views on how children acquire literacy skills, followed by an account of the use of technology to promote these skills presented in theme four. The final theme discussed the participants' views on working with students at home. Based upon the findings presented in this chapter, there are few literacy related issues upon which students, parents and teachers see eye to eye. Chapter five discusses the conclusions I have drawn based upon this information, along with recommendations for future research in this area.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Driving away from the school on my last day of interviews, I was filled with both a sense of sadness and excitement. The sadness came from knowing that I would probably never see most of the participants again and that I had grown fond of them over the course of my study. This sadness, however, was tempered by a sense of excitement which stemmed from a growing understanding that my work as a researcher had just begun, not come to a conclusion. In conducting research, the months one spends pouring over the data in an attempt to make sense of all that has been gathered is as critical to the research process as the actual data collection (Merriam, 1988). Driving away from the school on that final day, I had a feeling similar to that of the day that I graduated from high school. I knew that a large milestone in my life had just been passed, but that a new and exciting challenge awaited. On this occasion, that challenge was interpreting my findings and drawing conclusions from the abundance of data which had been

collected.

To answer the research question about how students, parents and teachers in one urban classroom view emergent literacy, five themes were identified in chapter four as reoccurring issues from the participants' responses.

The first theme explored what counted as reading and writing. Student responses centered around what occurred at work tables and placement in reading groups. Parent responses identified activities that did not count as reading and writing rather than identifying what did count. The teachers were not questioned concerning what counts as reading and writing.

The second theme, why children learn to read and write, again produced very different responses from the participant groups. Students focused mainly upon personal factors while teachers identified school related motivators. The only parent motivation discussed was preparing children for successful careers.

The third theme, how children learn to read and write, was the most frequently reoccurring topic and was broken into six sub-topics: the use of direct, explicit instruction, manipulatives in the classroom, writing as a teaching tool, nursery rhymes, the Waterford videos, and reading to children. The most commonly voiced view among

parents and students concerning how children learn was that oral repetition and writing were the preferred techniques. The teachers listed components of a balanced literacy classroom.

The use of computers for literacy instruction was the topic of the fourth theme. Students listed stories, teaching letters and sounds, and providing practice with writing as the ways in which computers instruct. Parents felt computers were beneficial as an end in themselves. Teachers saw the computers as providing a review of basic reading skills.

The final theme discussed in chapter four focused upon ways to work with children in their homes. Parents that were classroom volunteers voiced attempts at mimicking Ms. Paige when working with their children at home, while the remaining parents stated their instructional methods matched the ways in which they were taught as children.

Chapter four presented the participants' differing views on what counts as reading and writing, how and why children learn to read and write, the use of computers for literacy instruction and ideas on how to best work with children in their homes. In looking at the themes presented as findings in chapter four, I believe that much has been learned concerning the participants' views of emergent literacy throughout the completion of this study. Over the

course of visitations in the selected setting, numerous interviews, and hours of transcribing and interpreting the information gathered, five conclusions were drawn from the study. According to Borg & Gall (1989), qualitative research typically creates more hypotheses than it tests. The hypotheses that were created in the analysis stage of this study are listed below and presented as conclusions:

1. Children placed in high reading groups have a deeper metacognitive understanding of the ways they are learning to read and write than do children placed in lower groups.
2. More kindergarten students are motivated by personal factors than by school related issues.
3. The focus that kindergarten programs place upon issues unrelated to research-based predictors of reading success inhibits the implementation of these literacy strategies.
4. Few students or parents understand the ways in which computers assist children in learning to read and write.
5. Parents learn ways to work with children at home by participating in the classroom.

In an attempt to bring closure to this study, what

Greig and Taylor (1999) term "closing the loop," the conclusions and correlations with the themes from chapter four will be discussed in the following sections. Recommendations for practice and future research will also be discussed.

Metacognitive Understanding

There was clearly a relationship between metacognitive understanding and success in school for the children in this study. This conclusion became apparent when looking at the participants' definitions of what counted as reading and writing.

In Ms. Paige's classroom, there was a connection between the depth of each child's metacognitive understanding and the reading group in which they were placed. The children from the blue (high) group shared the clearest understanding of what reading and writing actually were and appeared to understand the purpose behind some of the activities in the classroom. The children from the green (middle) group had some understanding of these issues, while students from the red (low) group had little response to most questions concerning how and why they were learning to read and write. It is important to note that Ms. Paige did not have her students grouped by ability prior to the implementation of Direct Instruction. Before implementing

this technique her students were in mixed ability groups.

Both of the students from the blue group connected knowing letters of the alphabet with learning to read and were able to discuss some of the ways in which they were acquiring literacy skills. The two children in the green group were also able to verbalize some of the ways in which they were learning to read and write. The students from the red group gave very vague responses when questioned on what reading and writing were and verbalized little information as to how they were acquiring these skills.

I questioned whether the students in the blue and green groups were simply more verbal than the children in the red, but do not think that this was the case. Even when presented with yes and no questions concerning ways in which they were learning to read and write, the children in the red group were unable to respond. The question this brought forth was whether or not these children were placed in higher reading groups based upon this metacognitive knowledge, or whether their placement in ability groups is what actually caused the gap in metacognitive understanding. To answer this question, a close look at the teacher transcripts was necessary.

Ms. Paige referred to the ability levels of the students in each reading group and made it clear that I

would probably gain more information by talking with students from the blue group, and some from the green. She hinted that I was probably wasting time interviewing a couple of students, both of whom were from the red group. Gonder (1991) warned that when teachers have low expectations for their students, the students often adopt this perception of themselves.

The question this raised was in what ways were Ms. Paige's differing expectations made known to her students. One example of Ms. Paige treating students from each reading group differently occurred during Direct Instruction time. Ms. Paige introduced a lesson to the students by saying, "I know this is difficult for you, so let's put all eyes up here and try our best." A similar lesson was presented to the blue group later that morning with a different beginning. "This lesson is going to be easy for you, so let's see how quickly we can go through it." Their differing abilities were made known to the students right from the start.

This lead me to question what other differences may have occurred in the discussions during their group time. According to Cotton (1989), students placed in lower ability groups are often provided with less discussion on why they are learning specific skills. Therefore, the children in the

The examples provided in this section demonstrate how teacher expectations and placement of students in homogeneous ability groups can influence the information presented to students at different ability levels, the instructional techniques to which each group is exposed, the social structure that is created among students, and the depth of students' metacognitive understandings.

If we assume that metacognitive understanding is a teachable skill that can be developed in children through frequent discussions, then it is likely that student placement in ability groups will have a detrimental impact upon the metacognitive abilities of students placed in lower groups. A first recommendation of this study is to abandon the practice of placing students in homogenous work groups, and instead promote the use of mixed ability grouping which should avoid many of the expectation issues presented in this section.

A second recommendation is that all students be provided opportunities to participate in metacognitive discussions. Mates and Strommen (1995) stressed that the usefulness of instruction be made known to students as they are more likely to learn when they understand the purpose behind the learning. By assisting all students in understanding how and why they are learning, even at the

kindergarten level, we might move them more quickly through the learning process. Future studies testing the effects of mixed ability grouping combined with the use of metacognitive discussions at the primary level would be a natural extension of this study.

Student Motivation

The students in this study were motivated to read and write by personal factors. As discussed in chapter four, the reasons why the students in Ms. Paige's classroom were learning to read and write fell into two categories: school reasons and personal reasons. The school reasons centered around advancement to higher grade levels. The desire to learn in order to be promoted to higher grade levels was mentioned by seven of the 18 students.

Few students appeared to be motivated by classroom reward systems such as stickers or performance charts. Ms. Paige had one board with 'E' (excellent) student work displayed. I noted throughout my visits that the same students' work typically hung on the board. None of the students mentioned this board to me during our interviews, nor did I ever see children actively looking over the board. I commented to Jamal that his work was always hanging on the 'E' board and he replied, "Yea. I do good work." There was little enthusiasm in his statement and he ended this

conversation by walking away, showing little interest in discussing the topic further. I did not see this board as being highly motivating to any of the students, even those whose work was regularly displayed.

Another example of a teacher created classroom motivator was the Scoop on Reading bulletin board. Many of the students had 10 to 15 scoops on their ice cream cone. I noticed that Alex's had none. Ms. Paige explained:

> Alex's mom came in one day and noticed that he didn't have any scoops on his cone. She asked me about it and I explained that he was responsible for reading a book and having me or a parent volunteer add a scoop to his cone. Alex had made no attempt to add any scoops to his cone, despite the fact that he had probably read more books than any child in the classroom. His mother was very upset and asked if she could come in at the end of the day and make him read some books to add to his ice cream cone. The problem was, she missed the point. Alex didn't care about the bulletin board. He read for other reasons.

When asked if it bothered him that his cone was the shortest one in the class, Alex laughed, "It's just paper, not real ice cream." It was obvious that Alex was not motivated by

this particular performance chart.

What does this say to educators? Foremost, there is no one perfect way to motivate all students. The Scoop on Reading chart may have worked for some, the bulletin board displaying excellent work may have work for others, while for another group a simple sticker may have provided motivation. For a student like Alex, none of this may be necessary.

The issue this raises is not which forms of teacher created motivation were the most beneficial for Ms. Paige's students. Rather we need to look to the personal reasons that motivated her children. Do we want to train children to perform for a sticker in the same way that we train dogs to do tricks for a treat? The goal of motivation should be to move from extrinsic, school- related rewards to intrinsic, personal reasons for wanting to learn (Kohn, 1995).

The personal motivations for learning to read and write shared by the students demonstrated greater enthusiasm for learning than anything the teacher had created in the classroom. The students' personal reasons for learning ranged from pleasing parents so that work would be hung on the refrigerator, to pleasing God by learning to read the Bible. A few students, like Alex, even mentioned a desire to read for the sake of reading, and an interest in learning as

an end in itself.

Developing intrinsic motivation in students raises new issues for educators. How can teachers discover what motivates individual students? I was able to uncover some of the personal motivators of the students in Ms. Paige's class by having one-on-one conversations with each child. Because I showed a personal interest in the students, they were willing to share this information with me.

In discussing this issue with the teachers, it was clear that all felt pressed for time. Between teaching, managing student behavior, dealing with injuries, taking care of the paper work that seemed to arise daily, and rotating groups of students every twenty-minutes when their Direct Instruction timer buzzed, the teachers felt that they had little time to interact with students on a one-to-one basis. Therefore, teachers had little chance to discover the things that motivated each child.

Another issue that arose during the teacher interviews was that by teaching programs rather than children, teachers had little opportunity to connect learning to the students' personal interests. Ms. Paige shared, "I know that Alex likes bugs and loves reading books about bugs, but there is little of that in any of our texts. So there isn't much I can do." This attitude demonstrated the mind set of our

educational system; we teach programs and curriculum rather than individual children.

Aside from an attempt to connect learning to personal interests, Ms. Paige could have utilized personal motivation in goal setting. The students in this classroom, even at age five, appeared to have goals and to be working towards these in their own manner.

Many of the students had career goals and knew that they would have to succeed in school to achieve these. Antonio knew that he was going to grow up to be a policeman, and Alyssa knew that she was going to be a teacher. When is the right time to start discussing careers and educational goals with our students? Some may argue that age five is too young, however the children in Ms. Paige's room had begun to do some goal setting own their own. In discussing this with Ms. Paige, she was aware of these students' career dreams but considered them to be childlike fantasies rather than actual goals. "It's cute how Antonio wants to be like his dad. But kids go through dozens of career choices when they are this age. I wanted to be a ballerina and look where I am." The issue is not whether or not the child will actually become a policeman, but whether or not his current desire to do so can be built upon as an internal motivator for success.

The students in Ms. Paige's classroom stated very intrinsic reasons for wanting to learn. No child mentioned tangible rewards, bulletin boards, or stickers as motivation to read or write. In her sincere attempts to motivate her students, Ms. Paige may have been doing the children more harm than good by encouraging them to work for extrinsic rewards rather than to fulfill their own personal desires to learn (Kohn, 1995).

If children come to school naturally motivated to read and write by intrinsic reasons, and that appeared to be the case with many of Ms. Paige's students, then school may be responsible for the shift in their focus from learning for personal reasons to working for competition with classmates and performing for external rewards. A recommendation of this study is for schools to avoid developing reward systems that encourage children to learn for competition with classmates or extrinsic goals. Schools must be careful not to use motivational systems that do more damage to our students than good (Kohn, 1995).

To encourage students to work for intrinsic rewards, a further recommendation is for teachers to plan instruction based upon the individual interests of the children. Allowing students to write their own stories in journals and individualizing classroom instruction may assist teachers in

motivating their students to achieve. Mates and Strommen (1995) stated that students learn as a result of personalizing learning to make sense of their world. By assisting students in personalizing the learning process rather than strictly adhering to programs that do not match their interests or needs, teachers may assist their students in mastering skills at an accelerated pace.

Administrators may promote individualized instruction in their schools by assisting teachers in finding the time that all felt was lacking to prepare for this type of instruction. This may be accomplished through the use of resource faculty, assistants, or volunteers. By providing teachers with additional planning time and showing support for a shift to student centered instruction, administrators may help teachers bring about this change.

Future studies focusing upon the effects of instruction based on the interests of the students would be an interesting addition to this study. Research observing the effects of tangible reward systems might also be beneficial in helping teachers find positive methods for motivating student learning.

Curriculum Focus

The third conclusion drawn from this study was that the focus kindergarten programs place upon issues unrelated to

research-based predictors of reading success inhibits the implementation of these literacy strategies. When looking over the transcripts, it was clear that parents and students had little concrete understanding of how children learn to read and write. Though they did have some ideas such as learning letters and sounds, and printing the ABC's, these individuals did not know enough to evaluate the effectiveness of the literacy programs selected by their school.

This conclusion became more of a concern when reviewing the transcripts of the teacher interviews. Each teacher felt very pushed to carry out programs selected by their administration, and were more concerned with implementing these programs than with teaching strategies which they considered effective in developing their students' literacy skill. Many of the practices occurring in Ms. Paige's classroom were contrary to beliefs she expressed.

One example was the implementation of Direct Instruction. Prior to the school adopting this method, the students in Ms. Paige's class moved through centers of their choice while Ms. Paige and a parent volunteer worked with small groups of children. This reflected her belief that children learn through active exploration of their environment. With the start of Direct Instruction, this

free choice and time in centers ended and students were assigned to work tables for 20 minute periods. When children completed an assignment before the 20 minute timer went off, they were told to sit and reflect upon their own learning until time to rotate to the next center. Brain research indicates that five year old children have not yet developed an inner voice, and therefore cannot silently reflect upon anything (Hannaford, 1995). Moreover, students cannot reflect upon their learning unless they clearly understand what it is that they had just learned. This was one example of Ms. Paige implementing a program that conflicted with her beliefs about developmentally appropriate practices.

A second example involved the Writing to Read Program. This was a computer based program that focused upon letters and sounds. Ms. Paige stated that she felt the computer lessons benefitted her students, but that they did not gain much from completing the workbook pages. Yet she stated, "We do them because we're supposed to."

What does this say about classroom practices? Teachers should be spending class time in ways that will best assist their students in learning rather than implementing programs that have little to do with best practices for promoting reading success. Research tells us quite clearly what these best practices are (Hiebert et al., 1998; Snow et al.,

1998).

Looking back at the review of literature in chapter two, researchers almost unanimously agree upon five predictors of reading success. These predictors are phonemic awareness, knowledge of letters of the alphabet, oral language development, experiences with writing materials, and being read to on a daily basis (Adams, 1996; Cunningham, 1995; Fisher, 1991; Hiebert et al., 1998; Honig, 1996; Juel, 1994; Snow et al., 1998). The two most time-consuming programs being implemented in Ms. Paige's classroom, Direct Instruction and Writing to Read, focused almost solely upon knowledge of alphabet letters. Oral language time, when children socialized at learning centers, was almost completely deleted from Ms. Paige's instruction due to these two programs. Research expresses how crucial oral language development is for children in urban settings, as they often have less than half of the vocabulary of students from higher-income homes (Graves and Slater, 1987). The switch to Direct Instruction also took away the classroom time for many of the phonemic awareness and oral reading activities which Ms. Paige had previously been implementing through a balanced approach to literacy instruction.

Ms. Paige displayed a thorough knowledge of her students' individual strengths and weaknesses. Yet despite

knowing these strengths and weaknesses, Ms. Paige felt unable to do much individualization in a system where instructional programs were dictated and their completion evaluated at the administrative level. Ms. Paige felt that her school supported the teaching of programs rather than individual students.

The kindergarten teachers at this school based their instructional decisions upon two things: the programs they were told they had to implement, such as one hour of Direct Instruction reading groups daily, and their own action research. If something had worked consistently in their classroom, that was enough. The teachers showed little interest in what research had to say.

Attempts to bring research into the interview discussions with the teachers were thwarted as they steered conversations back to their classrooms. One reason for their redirection was that the teachers were unfamiliar with the research. When questioned specifically concerning topics in research, Ms. Paige responded, "It's been a long time since I was in college. I know I should keep up with reading more, but who has time? I try things in my classroom and if they work, I keep doing them. If they don't, I try something else." When asked if this theory would apply to programs like Writing to Read and Direct Instruction she said, "No. I

have to do those programs because the school dictates them."

Why is it a problem for teachers not to be familiar with research, relying solely upon what has worked for them in the past? Teachers will never stumble upon some techniques on their own unless they read about them. A teacher may also be able to save herself the trouble of implementing certain strategies by reading about the failures that other educators have had with the same methods (Greig & Taylor, 1999).

Even more important, however, is that teachers understand the 'why' behind their teaching. Teachers are professionals and continually make decisions relating to teaching practices. Snow et al. (1998) supported this need for teacher preparation if we are to prevent reading difficulties among young children.

> Teachers must know and be able to apply a variety of teaching techniques to meet the individual needs of students. They must be able to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and plan instructional programs that help students make progress. In addition to this expertise and content knowledge, teachers must master and integrate content knowledge that underlies the various subjects in the children's curriculum. (p. 279)

Without a strong knowledge base, teacher's decisions become shots in the dark.

Despite their inability to cite research studies, the kindergarten teachers at this school were doing many things that correlated heavily with research. Their classrooms were very active places where children were involved in daily reading and writing activities (Hiebert et al., 1998). Unfortunately the teachers were unable to explain why they had structured their classrooms in this manner. Perhaps these teachers could have convinced their administration to reject the adoption of programs that did not match their beliefs, had they been able to support their opinions with research. When teachers know the 'why' behind their instruction, they can better support their teaching practices to administrators and parents using this knowledge of research.

In defense of these teachers, educators at the classroom level are often not encouraged to learn research. They are seldom provided with professional libraries, are discouraged from taking time away from their classroom to attend conferences, and are given an abundance of manuals containing no research to read. These practices convince teachers that reading research is not an expected part of their job.

According to the teachers in this study, even the research related to programs which they were expected to implement in their classrooms was never presented to them. When discussing the Waterford program with the teachers, it became evident that they were unfamiliar with any of the research related to the program's development or success rates. Ms. Paige explained, "They probably showed all of that to the principal to convince her to buy the program, but all they told us was how to use it." The mind set that teachers do not need to know research is demonstrated in actions such as this.

Because literacy is currently a central focus in education, I recommend that schools question the quick fix solutions brought by implementing more programs and instead look to research for answers. By basing instruction upon predictors of reading success rather than upon pages in a program workbook, we may begin to see dramatic differences in the success rates of the students.

Snow et al. (1998) stated, "The many children who succeed in reading are in classrooms that display a wide range of possible approaches to instruction" (p. 19). For teachers to have the knowledge necessary to implement this wide range of approaches to literacy instruction, it is imperative that they become more knowledgeable concerning

educational research. I recommend that teachers be provided with current professional libraries and time in their workday to read and discuss these materials. Teachers need to be expected to have a research knowledge base relating to their specific area of instruction and be held accountable for this knowledge. Until we expect teachers to keep abreast of current research, it is unlikely they will take on this challenge. Future studies might test instructional effectiveness as it correlates with teacher knowledge of research.

Additional suggestions for future research include evaluating the current programs being implemented in our public schools based upon their correlation to predictors of reading success. A further suggestion would be to compare the success rates of a variety of literacy programs, such as those being implemented in Ms. Paige's classroom.

Computers as Teaching Tools

When discussing the use of computers for literacy instruction with the participants, the fourth conclusion from this study became evident; few students or parents understand the ways in which computers assist children in learning to read and write. It also became clear that though the teachers could verbalize the ways in which the computers were helping their students, they were making little

connection between the computers and their classroom instruction.

All but one student in Ms. Paige's classroom stated that they enjoyed their computer time, and most felt the computers were helping them learn to read and write. Many of the children, however, could not verbalize how the computers were helping. The students who could verbalize this felt the computers were helping them by reading stories, teaching letters and sounds, and practicing writing the alphabet. Some children saw no connection between the activities on the computer and learning.

The parents who were interviewed were happy that the students had computers in their classroom, because most felt that knowledge of computers would be a necessary skill for their children in the future. Many had little understanding of what actually occurred on the computers but were still pleased that these were a part of the classroom routine.

The teachers were very specific in identifying ways the computers were benefitting the students: increased attention spans, increased independence, early recognition of letters of the alphabet and increased knowledge of nursery rhymes. Each teacher also expressed a belief that the computers were assisting students who were not being reached by traditional

methods. Despite these positive reactions, the teachers assured me that the computers were not teaching new skills, only reinforcing previously taught curriculum.

To understand the correlation between the computer curriculum and classroom instruction, the teachers were questioned on how closely their instruction matched the Waterford Program. All three teachers agreed that Waterford worked on basic skills such as letter and sound recognition, and therefore did not need to match their instruction. The teachers made the assumption that because they went over letters and sounds daily with the students, the lessons on the computer would be a review for the students. This raised some concern as to how helpful the program was to children that were not mastering the skills taught in the classroom.

An example of a child not learning from the program was demonstrated as I watched Tiarra complete a lesson on the letter *V*. She was clicking on all of the *V*'s on the screen, and upon each click a piece of a picture was revealed. When questioned as to what letter she was clicking on, she could not tell me the name of the letter but responded, "The ones like this," and pointed to a *V*. Tiarra understood that she was revealing a picture, but made no connection between the picture revealed and the *V* sound. When asked what the picture was, Tiarra confused the picture of a valentine with

a heart. After I explained that it was a valentine and asked her what sound this picture began with, she gave the correct response. Only then did Tiarra understand the lesson. Dickinson (1994) noted that one of the key elements distinguishing effective programs for young children from less effective programs is the quality of teacher-student talk. Had I not been present to assist Tiarra, she would have likely learned little from this interaction with the computer. This raised the concern of how often students actually understand what they are supposed to be learning on the computer.

A further concern with students forging ahead at their own pace without adult supervision to check for comprehension was that they may be incorrectly learning information. In the example above, Tiarra was mistaking the valentine for a heart. She could have easily made the incorrect learning transfer that heart begins with the *V* sound. Slywester (1995) warned against allowing children to incorrectly learn new concepts because it is more difficult to reprogram the brain than it would have been to train it correctly from the start.

Brain research also affirms that students do not learn from constant input, but rather through interaction and experience with materials (Hannaford, 1995). Because

computers are designed to direct students' learning, they allow few opportunities for students to explore outside of the programmed pattern of each lesson. Though the lessons on the Waterford program are designed to match research-based predictors of reading success (Heuston, 1996), it is questionable how much students will retain from these lessons without guided discussions and further exploration of the skills introduced.

Families are unlikely to provide discussions at home relating to skills taught on computers, due to a lack of knowledge concerning what the computers are teaching. Henderson and Berla (1994) stressed how crucial this is by stating that the single best predictor of a child's achievement in school is not race nor socio-economic level, but extent to which a child's family is involved in the educational process. If parents are uncertain of the methods of instruction occurring in their child's classroom, it will be difficult for them to work with the child in meaningful ways at home.

This lack of reinforcement of skills taught on the computers also occurs at school when the teachers do not review the information which is presented at the computer station. All three teachers stated that Waterford did not correlate with their instruction because students worked at

their own individual pace. Therefore all of the children were on different lessons, making it impossible to correlate this with instruction.

Aside from the lack of correlation between the computers and classroom instruction, another concern was that teachers were unable to accurately use the assessment tools provided by the Waterford Program. Going back to the story of Tiarra working on the letter *V*, the computer would have reported that Tiarra had mastered the letter and the sound in that lesson, when actually she could not identify the name of the letter. If teachers are going to use the assessment tools provided by computer programs, it is crucial that they observe and discuss the lessons with the students to check for understanding.

It was apparent from the interview discussions that most of the participants viewed the computers as a positive component in Ms. Paige's classroom. The concern relating to a lack of understanding by students, parents and possibly even the teachers as to the benefits provided by the computers is that it is impossible to evaluate a program's effectiveness at meeting students' needs if we do not understand precisely how the computer is supposed to be assisting our students. Without a solid understanding of the program goals and practice at incorporating these into

classroom assessment and instruction, programs such as Waterford and Writing to Read are unlikely to provide the maximum benefit to our students.

Based upon this conclusion, I recommend that parents and students participate in workshops explaining the objectives behind any technology program used in a classroom, and that exploration time for parents to become comfortable with technology be provided. Teachers need to be trained on ways to best integrate their computer programs with their own classroom instruction, and encouraged to talk with students about what they have learned at the computer station to extend their learning. Computers will become a more effective teaching tool when students, parents and teachers understand the concepts being taught through technology and begin reviewing these skills with the children (Lunenburg & Irby, 1999).

Future studies relating to the use of technology might explore the effectiveness of individual programs or compare the effects on one program when integrated into classroom instruction as compared to being used as an isolated learning center. A variety of technology programs might also be studied to look at program effectiveness both with and without family involvement.

Role Models For Parents

Research assures us that students exhibit achievement increases as parents become involved in the educational process (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Some research attributes this achievement gain to students' improved attitudes when parents become involved (Duda & Green, 1995). Others attribute it to the fact that parent expectations increase and, therefore, children's performance (Department of Education, 1994). The fifth and final conclusion from this study suggests yet another reason for the gain in student achievement when families become involved in their child's education: family members learn effective ways to work with children at home by participating in the classroom.

Conclusion five was drawn from the final theme in chapter four, working with children at home. Parents' views on how to work with students at home differed greatly between those parents who were classroom volunteers and those who were not. The parents who did not volunteer in Ms. Paige's classroom used more direct methods of instruction with their children at home such as copying words and writing letters of the alphabet to teach reading. This supported research on urban, African-American families; "Most parents tended to assume that repetition and drill would accomplish the desired goals" (Harry et al., 1996, p.

197). For many of the parents, this is how they were taught, and so it is their only model for teaching their own children.

Parent volunteers that were frequently in the classroom, however, had a role model in Ms. Paige. All three of these parents voiced attempts at imitating Ms. Paige when working with their children at home. Ms. Jackson was not a classroom volunteer, but she had recently conferenced with Ms. Paige to receive advice on how to work with her son at home. The remaining two parents that were not volunteers both mentioned teaching their children using methods that were used with them when they were children.

Ms. Coleman expressed her views concerning the importance of educating parents.

> My kids came to school knowing their letters. We taught them that at home. But from what I've seen, a lot of these parents wish they had known how to help them do better in school. Like now they are saying I could have taught them that if I had only known. Like they don't need to just sit there quietly with their kids. They can say things like, "What color is that?" and "What letter does car begin with?" But most of them just don't know.

Not only do some of the parents not have decent models of appropriate teaching, but some may actually be causing their children more harm than good. An example of this is Jeffery's grandmother having him read for punishment. Jeffery stated that she yells at him to go to his room and

read when he makes too much noise inside the house. Though probably unintentionally, she has helped Jeffery to form a negative association with reading.

There are many important strategies for working with children at home that parents can learn by simply observing their child's teacher. They can learn questioning techniques, how to assist children in discovering answers rather than telling them answers, the importance of positive reading experiences with young children, and why to allow children to write and read their own stories, not just copy letters. It became very clear while talking with the classroom volunteers how powerful Ms. Paige was as a model for these families.

Most research related to forming home and school partnerships focuses upon the benefits these partnerships provide to students (Foster, 1992; Henderson, 1994; Rasinski, 1995). Though I agree that students should be the focus of our concern, it is also important to consider the positive impact that can be made upon the family members who become involved in classrooms. I recommend that schools work towards involving all parents, especially those from lower socio-economic homes, in their child's classroom.

Research shows that many parents do not know how to positively involve their children in literacy activities in

the home (Purcell-Gates et al., 1995). These parents will learn ways to work with children at home by participating at school. Programs training families in quality early literacy activities in the home will have positive impacts on student reading achievement (Henderson & Berla, 1994). These parents will gain insight on effective literacy instruction, providing them with models to imitate in their homes. Research exploring the development of parent training programs that actively involve parents in the classroom would extend the findings of this study.

Closing Remarks

As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, Borg and Gall (1989) suggested that qualitative research typically creates more hypotheses than it tests. The conclusions from this study raised some interesting questions that can provide topics for future study, aside from those previously mentioned in this chapter.

If time were not a factor, then a cross-case analysis might provide interesting comparisons of classrooms in different sites, particularly comparing the perceptions of participants from differing socio-economic levels. Another study might interview students and parents from different grade levels in the same site to determine how perceptions of literacy acquisition change over time. Whatever studies

are built upon the findings and conclusions gathered here, it is important to keep in mind that studying the classrooms in which we work is the key to improving the teaching of reading (Greig & Taylor, 1999).

Emergent literacy is currently receiving an abundance of attention in our country, even among non-educators. Snow et al. (1998) explained,

> A major source of urgency in addressing reading difficulties derives from their distribution in our society. Children from poor families, children of African American and Hispanic descent, and children attending urban schools are at much greater risk of poor reading outcomes than are middle-class, European-American, and suburban children. (p.27).

As this study presents the views of African-American students and parents from one urban classroom, my hope is that it sheds some light on this critical issue.

Though this study only explored the views of a small group of individuals, it can still provide important contributions to the field of education. Greig and Taylor (1999) argued the need to share small scale research.

> Small scale research which is not communicated to the rest of our profession could lead to the duplication of effort, with the potential for many

> individuals investigating similar problems over and over again - the proverbial reinventing the wheel. The continual re-investigation of a particular issue does not broaden a profession's knowledge base nor does it advance practice. There is also the potential for wasting valuable and often scarce resources. (p.7)

Because this study only presents the views of individuals from one classroom, I would caution against generalizing these findings to other populations. Though some researchers warn against assuming too much from single case studies (Borg and Gall, 1989), some believe that these individual cases are where theories need to begin (Rowland, 1984). Merriam (1988) stressed that we are not looking for truths in qualitative research, rather we are attempting to clear up misconceptions. To this end, this study may be helpful in clearing up current misconceptions with similar populations.

This study demonstrated that students, parents and teachers had very different perceptions concerning how and why children acquire emergent literacy skills. A starting point to resolving this issue is to improve communication and collaboration among the three groups. Enz and Searfoss (1996) eloquently stated our challenge:

> It is our responsibility as educators and child

> advocates to work together with families to enhance children's opportunities to become successful readers and writers. Expanding our views of family literacy, serving as professional resources, and actively involving the community in classroom programs are essential and exciting first steps toward creating successful family literacy programs. (p. 578)

By working together and using all tools available, including technology, parents and teachers will have a much better chance of meeting the diverse needs of our future students.

Appendices

Appendix A

Parent Letter of Consent

Parent Letter of Consent

Dear Parent,

Ms. Bronwyn McLemore, a teacher in Duval County, is working with professors from the University of North Florida on her doctoral dissertation. She is interested in understanding how students make sense of the processes by which they become readers and writers. To gather information, she will be talking with students here in our classroom.

Ms. McLemore will be visiting us three or more times throughout this school year, and talking with students as they work in the room. She will code the students' responses using numbers instead of their names to conceal the identity of the children. Please sign and return this form to me as soon as possible, indicating whether or not she has your permission to talk with your child.

Ms. McLemore will be audiotaping her talks with the students and transcribing them later into written notes, but again no names will be recorded. Information gathered will be used for the purposes of completing her dissertation, and may possibly be published in the form of journal articles, meeting papers or book publications. In signing this form, you are giving Ms. McLemore permission to use information gathered from talking with your child in these ways.

Another portion of her study will focus upon parent views of the ways in which children learn to read and write. If you would consider participating in this study by talking with Ms. McLemore, please mark that space on this form, and she or I will contact you. Should you have any questions please contact either Dr. Janice Wood (620-2610) or Ms. McLemore (241-3840). Thank you for your help in this matter.

Sincerely,

(Teacher)

Child's Name: _____

Parent Signature: _____

_____ Yes, my child may be interviewed by Ms. McLemore for the purposes described above.

_____ No, I do not want my child to be interviewed for the purposes described above.

****_____ I would be willing to talk with Ms. McLemore to provide her with parental views.

Adult Consent Form

I am willing to talk with Ms. Bronwyn McLemore and allow her to audiotape the interview sessions. By signing this form I am giving my permission for Ms. McLemore to use the information gathered during our interviews for the purposes of writing her dissertation, journal articles, meeting papers or books, with the understanding that my name will not be used in any form throughout her publications.

_____ _____

Subject Date

_____ _____

Principal Investigator Date

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1989	Masters in Elementary Education Florida State University

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June 1995 - July 1995	Graduate Research Assist Graduate Instructional Assistant University of North Florida
1995 - 1998	Adjunct Instructor University of North Florida
July 1996 - July 1998	Literacy Facilitator for Duval County
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PUBLICATIONS

McLemore, B. (1997)(July). The Waterford Institute Early Reading Program: Paving the road to success. The Florida Primary Educator,4(6) 5-6.

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Wood, J., & McLemore, B. (1996). Best practices: Family, school, community partnerships. [Brochure] Tallahassee, FL: Florida Department of Education.

HONORS AND AWARDS

1995	Semi-finalist for Duval County Teacher of the Year
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1997	Florida Primary Educator of the Year
1994-1998	Recipient of five Duval Public Education Foundation Grants